Toradora! Volume4

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Toradora!:Volume4

These are color illustrations that were included in volume 4

とらドラ4!

夏休み、みんなで亜美の別荘に行くことになった竜児と大河。この機会にそれぞれ好きな人との距離を縮めたい二人だが、共倒れを避けるため一方は完全サポートにまわることに。それを賭けて二人は勝負をするが――。

そして舞台は海辺の別荘へ。場所は違えどやっぱり暴れる大河、はじける実乃梨、真意の読めない亜美。そんな中、竜児と大河はとある作戦を敢行するが、はたしてその顛末は……？

絡まりはじめた互いの関係に要注目。大好評の超弩級ラブコメ第4弾！

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竹宮ゆゆこ（たけみや）

2月24日生まれ、東京在住。11月末、日光に旅行してきました。写真をご覧下さい。楽しそうだろう、これが湿度100%の世界だ。視界5メートルの超濃霧、生き物の気配はゼロ。車も通りません。紅葉シーズンど真ん中でしたが、葉っぱなんか見えねえ見えねえ！

【電撃文庫作品】

わたしたちの田村くん
わたしたちの田村くん2
とらドラ！
とらドラ2！
とらドラ3！
とらドラ4！

イラスト：ヤス

1984年8月3日生。O型。徳島県生まれで千葉県在住。来年前半にはアパートを引っ越すことが大決定。今度こそ良い部屋探してみせる！　絶対！

カバー／暁印刷

とらドラ4!

竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト◎ヤス

今回のテーマ!

夏休みの過ごし方
～8月某日、天気・快晴～

「なんだぁ？　……おう、酒くさっ！」「うへ〜……ひっく……ふへえ」

帰宅した泰子が玄関先でぶっ倒れる音で起床。せっかくの夏休みだというのに、随分早くに目が覚めてしまった。とりあえず、泰子を寝室まで運んだら、やることもねえし味噌汁のダシでもとるか。

ゆっくり朝飯の支度をして、そうだ、せっかく早起きしたんだし、エアコンのフィルターの掃除でもしよう。その後は風呂の排水溝を徹底的にやっつけて、それから窓を拭いて、洗濯物もやっちまおう。それでもってコンロを重曹で磨いて、畳を乾拭きして、

「竜ちゃあん……おみずぅ……おみずぅ〜……ふえぇ〜ん」

はいはい、水な。麦茶でいいか？

［ am7:00、高須家にて ］

am10:00、
生徒会室にて

「あれ、会長はまだか。おはよう、生徒会諸君！」「うっ、北村先輩、汗臭い！」
臭いだと？　なにを言うか。
この汗は、朝っぱらからこの炎天下の中、部長としてきっちり部活に顔を出し、普段の練習メニューをこなした上にロードワークまで終えてきた、さわやか球児の聖なる汗だぞ。まさしく健全さの証、健康にして清潔なこの身に滲むこの汗こそ俺の誇りであって、
「うわ！　なんだてめぇ暑っっっ苦しい！」
――おはようございます、会長。今すぐシャワーを浴びてきます。

pm12:30、
某ファミレスにて

「すいませーん、注文いいですかぁ？」
「はーい、ただいま！」
おらおらおらおらおらきたきたきたきたきたぁー！　今日も地獄のランチタイムが幕を開けたぜぇ！　総員、全方位からの注文に備えよっ！　おタバコはお吸いになりますか喫煙席ならすぐにお席がご用意できますっ！　おーっとあの野郎！　ただいまよりランチドリンクのずる飲み警戒監視体勢に入るっ！　ハンバーグのお皿は熱くなっておりますのでお気をつけくださーい！　個別会計はご遠慮いただいておりまーす！　申し訳ありませんそちらはグランドメニューなので今の時間は、
「ねえ、こっちのランチまだあ!?」
うおぉぉぉ――――っ！

「えぇ～、全然細くなんかないですよお！
ほら、この辺のお肉、気になっちゃって！」
「ああ、そうだね」
う・る・せ・え・ん・だ・こ・の・ガ・キ！
たっかがジムのトレーナー風情がこの完
璧に美しくもかわいらしい亜美ちゃん様
のパーフェクトボディにご意見するとは
いい度胸じゃねえかてめえ、ああ!?　そ
うだね、だあ!?　ええ!?
この亜美ちゃんの肉体の美しさの前にひ
れ伏し、拝み、涙を流し、畏れ多さに心臓
止まるぐらいがてめえにはお似合いなん
だよぉ！　さあ這いつくばって許しを請
いな！　ダボハゼ！
「でも、それぐらいのスタイルが一番綺麗
だよ」
えぇ～、そうですかあ？　やだもう、そん
なことないですー♥

pm15:00、
某モデルご用達ジムにて

「ステキなお式だったね！　そうだ、この後食事でも」「ごっめーん、旦那が待ってるんだ！」……そうね。そうよね。そうだよね。

ごめんね、私独身だから空気読めなくて。ごめんね、私独身だから家で待ってる人もいなくて。……今夜もファミレスで一人ご飯か。ま、気楽だし、雑誌買って持ち込めば人の目も気にならないし。最近のファミレスってファミレスのくせして、グラスワインも頼めるし、悪くないんだよなあ。ああでも、うちの生徒に見られなきゃいいけど……。

「でもまあゆりは先生っていう立派なお仕事もしてるし、いいよねえ、独身ライフ！」

……本気か？　かわるか？　人生。本当にかわりたいか？　かわってみっか？

pm19:00、
結婚式場にほど近い路上にて

pm22:00、
再び高須家にて

「おい。大河、おい！　寝るなって！」「……」
今日の朝ごはんは、具沢山味噌汁とアジの開き。
今日の昼ごはんは、竜児とやっちゃんと三人で行ったスドバのトーストセット。
今日の夜ごはんは、牛肉のオイスターソース炒め。
おなかいっぱい……おなかいっぱい……。
「こら！　寝るなら自分ちに戻れ！　ったく、安穏なツラしやがって……ふぁーあ……」
……うるっさいなあ……眠れないじゃんか。ぐぅ。

夏休み・別荘旅行編は
次ページから！

デザイン◎荻窪裕司

Chapter 1

Seriously, he was not cute.

With that said, you couldn't call him brave, rugged or intelligent either.

He was making a horribly pathetic face. He looked malnourished, pitiful, and just plain sad.

Undoubtedly, he was a dog.

When he noticed what was going on, he was alone. Even walking around made him breathless, and as he was lonely, there was really no helping it. He had no choice. All he could do was lay down.

He laid himself down before the "girl", and while prostrating himself, he pleaded to her. "Won’t you please , please be with me", he said. "I can’t live as a single dog, so won’t you please marry me", he said.

"Can’t be helped", she said before stepping on his dog head with her shoes and breathing a heavy sigh through her nose. Her lips were curled and she made a

complicated expression that was a blend of compassion and contempt. She told him, "If you're willing to go so far as to say that, then it looks like you're ready, I suppose."

And thus, the dog and the "girl" were bound together.

Their new home was the Takasu residence. It had appeared out of nowhere. However, he had trouble describing what had happened. The two-story rented house had completely transformed, and now looked like a stereotypical triangular-roofed doghouse...

"Ryū-cha~n, come here... Look, a lot of children were just born. This one's white, and this one's spotted, and this one's light brown, just look, a lot of puppies were born~. Taiga-chan, she had a lot of children for us~."

It looks like Yacchan has become the grandmother of all these puppies...

"..."

He finally opened his eyes.

Even for a while after he opened his eyes, it felt as if his heart was being squeezed tightly.

Having just been released from his first experience of near-paralysis, Ryūji Takasu still couldn't even wipe the cold sweat from his brow. Breathing heavily several times, he finally made his escape by rolling out of bed. Like a dog, he started crawling on his hands and knees over the clean but aged tatami mats. Then, while in a prostrating pose with his forehead against the ground, he began forcing the air from his lungs...

"Was, it, a, dreeeeam...~?"

...until finally, his cry wouldn't come out anymore. Still feeling tense, he remained immobile. His T-shirt was drenched with cold sweat, and his entire body was still trembling because of the remnants of that bad dream. He ran his stiff fingers through his hair that dripped of his wet sweat as if he had just gotten out of the shower, and then firmly yanked at the wet mass.

What a dream. Or rather, nightmare.

His dog self, having failed at life, had prostrated himself before Taiga and convinced her to be with him.

She had even ended up having puppies. He wondered if there was any future more miserable than something like that. If there was, he wanted to know, he really wanted to hear it, or anything that would dampen the shock of that dream even just a little. Seeing such a dark outcome was just that shocking for him. The dogs, the prostrating, Taiga and the doghouse, and then on top of all that, they were seriously poor - at least that was the impression he'd gotten. Grandma Yasuko and Taiga, who had been holding the puppies in their arms, had both been wearing primitive animal skin dresses. Taiga's had a fitting tiger pattern.

Quite surprisingly, it was four in the morning. The midsummer dawn was getting brighter outside his window. He could even hear the cries of the cicadas.

Taking a breath, he felt exhausted. As he went over things in his mind, he thought of something particular.

It was after they had eaten dinner last night. It was really hot, and there was nothing on TV, and on top of having nothing to do, the air conditioner was broken. Since they felt like watching a scary movie, he and Taiga had gone to rent a DVD.

True Stories: The Terrifying Archipelago of Japan. That was the title of the movie. For some reason, they ended up choosing it, but it turned out to be so cheap-looking that they wondered if it could've been a gag movie. Other than obvious CG, the rope suspending the mannequin disguised as a corpse had been completely visible... On top of that, a man who was likely a staff member could even be seen pulling that very rope. Not to mention, that same man appeared in the next part as the actor being chased around by a generic stalker woman who had long single-length hair, wearing something like a trenchcoat.

To have watched that terribly crappy three-part mini-series to the end, even while criticizing everything about it, he could only attribute such an act to the power of boredom.

It was the third story that had probably done it. *The Terrifying Archipelago: Kansai Story ~ I Gave Birth to a Dog-baby!...* The only thing that was even a bit scary that was the dreadful screaming voice of the unfamiliar no-name actress. "Iyaaaah, spots are popping up on my baby~~!" She was cradling a dalmatian puppy and trying valiantly to fake a Kansai accent.

They had laughed at the movie heartily, saying to one another "Ahh, what a waste of money!" and "What a waste of time!" until finally, Taiga started feeling tired and went back home to her apartment next door.

The fact that such a horrible movie had caused him to have a nightmare made him feel pathetic. Was he really looking to get such a return on the rental charge, he wondered. If it was this sort of "terror", he would've rather avoided it, even if it cost him money.

"Se~riously... it was the most horrible, that sort of..."

He didn't even need to try isolating which part he was referring to as "most horrible". The whole thing was the most horrible thing ever in every sense of the word. Involuntarily sighing for the umpteenth time, he rubbed at his forehead that was drenched and chilled with cold sweat.

Wanting to at least breathe in some fresh morning air in hopes of flushing out this horrible feeling, Ryūji opened the window that was opposite his bed. But the unexpectedly muggy air made him involuntarily stick out his tongue in disgust.

And then,

"...~!"

He froze.

In a sense, something even more dreadful than his dream had appeared outside his window.

About at the same height, he was looking towards the second floor of the neighboring deluxe apartment that was separated by a fence. Through the open window of Taiga Aisaka's bedroom, the one wearing a messy camisole and glaring back at Ryūji was none other than Taiga herself.

As she was standing over there, he wondered what in the world had happened to her, since she had a lightning-shaped crease on her forehead, and her upper lip was quivering and curled upwards with overflowing disgust. Her hair was ruffled up into a horrible mess, looking like she had suffered the after-effects of a cartoon bomb. With an expression overflowing with contempt, like a tiger that had tried to swallow a poisonous snake in one gulp but ended up choking on it, she seemed to be asking "Just how long have you been there like that" as she was suddenly glaring at Ryūji. She was glaring at the window of the Takasu residence.

He was hesitant to greet her with even a simple "Good morning" as her entire body seemed to be emitting dreadful and negative spark-like waves.

"Ryūji..."

With a chill, he felt as if cold blood was rising from the depths of his stomach. Then,

"I had a horrible dream. A really, extremely... horrible dream... You were the dog, and the dog was the husband , and the children were dogs, and I had a tiger pattern... Anyway, it was the most horrible dream ever..."

Gulping, he couldn’t think of a response.

No way.

It was beyond mere coincidence, that these acquainted neighbors had the same nightmare on the same night, and at the same time. With their synchronization rates maxed, will this rented house and the deluxe apartment end up fusing into one?

Maybe this was a dream as well. Wondering that, Ryūji slowly closed the window and, pretending that he

hadn’t seen or heard anything, slipped under the covers of his bed.

He didn’t want to think about anything anymore...

* * *

"Keikokumu," Taiga Aisaka muttered.

"...Keiko dot com? Is that some sort of pornographic site... Ack!"

"Idiot, that’s not it. I said, warn, ing, dream."

Just because he had misheard her, this girl had aimed at his eyes and thrown a piece of chopped spring onion with her chopsticks.

"I’m talking about that seriously horrible nightmare from this morning. I was just wondering if it could be a

warning dream. Maybe our subconscious minds showed us that sort of thing because we're just about to go on that trip tomorrow."

"...What are you talking about?"

Glancing at Ryūji, who was wiping soumen sauce from his face as he replied to her, she slurped her soumen noodles. While looking at her mouth, Ryūji nibbled at a piece of Japanese ginger. His eyes were overly bloodthirsty and gave off an almost unearthly glow, as they glinted like the blade of a Japanese sword. But it wasn't like he had eaten some sort of illegal substance that made him see psychedelic hallucinations. It was just that the negative feelings of that dream continued to linger.

The sun was already glaring down outside the window, and even though the light didn't reach directly inside, it was still muggy in the 2DK residence at 11 am.

Even though it was summer vacation, there was no such thing in the Takasu residence as being too late for breakfast.

While muttering, "You have no common sense" pompously from across the table, Taiga greedily tried to grab all the soumen noodles,

"Ohh~!"

The noodles fell from her chopsticks. Deftly picking up a more appropriate amount of soumen noodles, Ryūji silently placed them in Taiga's sauce for her. Of course, without showing even a shred of gratitude, she slurped up the white noodles with her pursed rosy lips and in an instant, they were gone. After she had swallowed them,

"...In other words, it's just like it sounds; that dream is a warning. Like, this is what will happen if you don't do something to prevent it."

"I see... So you're saying it has nothing to do with the fact that we watched that weird movie before going to sleep. Then, just what's the connection between the dream and the trip to Kawashima's place?"

"Haaa~~h..." She gave a long sigh. Taiga put down her chopsticks like she was simply dumbstruck. While tilting up her chin and looking down on Ryūji, she pompously placed her chin in the palm of her hands.

"Today, your lack of sense has been annoying. It's really gotten on my nerves. I've even lost my appetite thanks to you, so you can just clear the table."

"...If you're going to eat two whole bundles of noodles by yourself... then at least take care of your own dishes."

"I'm so full I can't move."

"You'll become a cow you know."

"Better than an incompetent dog."

Rather than coming up with a retort, simply withdrawing seemed like it would be a bit faster and less of a drain all around. While thinking up ways to curse her, like "Go ahead and become a cow, then I'll milk you" , Ryūji started piling up the empty dishes. The life of a dairy farmer with a tiger-patterned cow sounded much better than living out his days as a dog slave.

"Well, back to the topic. So that dream, in other words, our dream where you didn't even get a chance to confess to Minorin and I didn't get a chance to be with Kitamura, that right there is already a sad enough future. *You don't want it to turn out like this, right. It's dreadful, isn't it. If so,*

then you have to try harder! is basically what it's telling us. You think that sort of thing would be unpleasant too, right?"

"Yeah... I'm pretty sure we've established that we don't want that to happen."

Staring with his dully shining eyes at Taiga, who wasn't lifting a finger to help him clean up, Ryūji muttered negatively.

"...You're rather cheeky considering you bent down on your own... But whatever, that's right. And so basically, it's a warning that if we don't take full advantage of this upcoming trip, which is our big chance, then that's the future that awaits us. That's what I got from it anyway."

Talking for a while like that, Taiga folded the cushion she had been sitting on and, using it as a pillow, laid down on the tatami mat floor. While still sprawled on the ground, she raised one white leg straight up into the air like she was doing synchronized swimming before firmly pressing the sole of her foot against the wall.

He was furrowing his brow thinking "What bad manners", but regarding the actual topic at hand, Ryūji had no room to argue. It's just, he wished she wouldn't

add that questionable overtone, like calling the dream a warning.

The big chance that Taiga mentioned, or in other words the upcoming trip, was of course the three day, two night stay at Ami's summer house that started tomorrow.

At the end of the first term, they had argued harshly over who was going, involving the rest of the class and eventually ended up in a swimming competition. It was eventually decided that it would be a trip for five people: Kitamura, Minori, Ami, and then Ryūji and Taiga. For Ryūji and Taiga, who were both generally unfamiliar with family trips because of various reasons, it was the one major event of their otherwise dull and tedious summer. Not to say that they weren't being honest with each other right now, but they were very excited, so much so that they had been counting down the days left until the actual trip. They were even planning to go shopping for the trip at the station building later today.

The main reason they were both so excited was, of course, the fact that it was an overnight trip with their respective crushes... They were both counting on the possibility that a good atmosphere might come up. In

Ryūji's case, of course, that meant when he was together with Minori Kushieda.

Without pausing in his work, Ryūji let his face slacken happily.

"You don't really need to mention incomprehensible stuff like premonitions. A chance like this is rare. I don't really get to talk with Kushieda at school, so if possible, I'm hoping that at least this time I'll be fortunate enough to get closer to her, even if it's just a little."

"And there it is. Right there."

Still sprawled out, Taiga looked at Ryūji with her terrifyingly bright eyes.

"Wh, what?"

"It's because you're like that. That's why we ended up seeing something as horrible as that warning dream."

Flipping up her long hair that gently flowed down past her waist, Taiga rested her chin in her hands while on the cushion, looking upwards. From gaps in her long bangs, her round, somewhat moist brow and her nose that traced a delicate line could be seen. Her thin lips

brought to mind a rose bud, and her drowsy eyes that stared up at Ryūji were like mischievously flickering gems. Although her long eyelashes drooped over them, they still gave off a flickering light,

"Geez, you're a naturally stupid dog through and through. Your dashi is way too intense, you know. It's only suitable for extreme maniacs."

If not for her personality, the girl in front of him would be a perfect beauty.

"...Just what are you staring at? Shall I wrap this up?"

"..."

Rather than speak empty words, this girl actually follows through with what she says.

Just like her name sounded, Taiga Aisaka was a girl with the ferociousness and recklessness of a tiger. She was known as the Palmtop Tiger. Despite being 140 cm tall with a small build unbefitting of a second-year high school student, her power, her temperament, and her ferocity made all the people around her keep their distance out of fear.

With that said, while sitting Japanese-style beside her, Ryūji at least looked like he matched the Palmtop Tiger. His viciously glinting sanpaku eyes were filled with a near insanity that, if he were a normal delinquent, seemed enough to kill around five people at a time just by glaring at them. But it was just hereditary. That was all his face was, an appearance.

Methodical, awkward, and a soft person who was not very strong and easily did chores as naturally as breathing, that was just the kind of man Ryūji Takasu was. Ryūji privately thought that it was incredible for someone like him to pass his time like this with a girl like her.

But of course, he wasn't going to let Taiga know about those sort of flimsy thoughts.

"Is that all right? I'll kindly spell things out for you since you're such a dullard, so listen closely, okay?"

"Uguh."

Coming up from below, she forcefully jabbed Ryūji's chin with her delicate finger and continued to apply pressure. As she stared at him, her eyes shimmered with a contempt that bordered on outrage.

"You've been saying things like, 'if possible' and 'even just a little' and 'fortunate enough', right?"

"T, that's right! What about it? And don't jab people in the chin."

"You're always like that. 'If possible~', 'if it's okay', 'it would be nice if things went well', 'ufufu' ~writhe~, and so on. This whole time, you've... No, both of us have been like that, just hanging back and waiting for some sort of lucky break, and so we've always ended up failing. Isn't that the pattern that's developed? If we let it continue, then our whole lives will follow that pattern. Unless we finally notice what's going on, the dog will be you and the wife will be me, and then at our doghouse wedding reception, Minorin and Kitamura will probably be like 'We were supporting those two the whole time~~! !' as they make a heartfelt toast."

"...No...way, that's..."

He didn't remember the "Ufufu"' or the writhing part, but... Her idea that they were falling into a pattern seemed reasonable enough. There just might be one. He couldn't deny that. Looking at Ryūji's face, Taiga firmly nodded once,

"Right? And that's why we had that warning dream. Everything will be absolutely decided in one shot right now, so if you don't break this pattern of failure, a dog-filled future is really lying in wait, is what it was saying. This long-awaited once in a lifetime chance, if we let it get away then we may never get another opportunity."

"...So in other words, on this trip, we're going to be working together again, hoping that something good might..."

"There you go again! That's still following the pessimism. That whole way of thinking is. Rather than that, we're going to really go all out this time. We absolutely, absolutely do not want things to end up like that nightmare. So don't you think we should focus all our energy, having one of us helping the other? It would be better than our mutual destruction, right?"

"O, okay..."

As his chin was pressed upwards by her finger, he couldn't really nod, but she was probably right. It seemed like even Taiga could say something surprisingly clever every once in...

"All right then, so you'll forget about your own situation this time around and just work on getting me and Kitamura-kun together, so work hard okay? Our futures are on the line here, I'm leaving it up to you."

"...Ah?"

She spoke ridiculously fast. Like in a written contract, it was the fine print that a corrupt lending institution might hide somewhere on the document. Having completely outpaced Ryūji with her totally decisive words, Taiga laid back down on the cushion.

"Haa, I'm thirsty. Hey you, go get me some barley tea. And put ice in it."

Immediately thinking "Hey wait a second", Ryūji continued to sit Japanese-style, harshly glaring down at Taiga's face as she sprawled herself out on the floor.

"...You, stop playing around. I heard you completely you know. Why did you automatically start talking like we've already decided? Based on what you were just saying, you could just as easily support me instead, right ?"

"..."

"Don’t ignore me!"

"You’re so... noisy!"

He yanked the cushion from beneath Taiga’s head.

"I’m not joking! After you spouted on and on, in the end, that was all you really wanted to say, wasn’t it?! How selfish can you get?!"

"What the heck're you doin’, you baldie?!"

"I’m not going bald!"

"I’m just putting my own affairs first! What’s wrong with that?!"

"Y, you’re so hard to deal with..."

"Give me back my pillow!"

"This is my cushion!"

"Pillow!"

"Cushion!"

They struggled wordlessly over the cushion for a while. While the two remained sitting, they tugged with all their strength as if whoever possessed it would be declared the victor.

"Nngh...~"

"...Ooh...~"

However, upon hearing the sound of the cushion starting to tear somewhere, Ryūji instinctively let go (Call it an Ooka judgment). So naturally, Taiga flopped cleanly backwards,

"Ee~!"

The back of her head hit the dining table hard. **Bam!** As the horrible sound resounded, she balled up, and, embracing her successfully retrieved cushion, she silently held her head.

"H, hey... Are you okay?"

Judging by the sound, that impact was no laughing matter. It would be really bad if she became any more of an idiot. When Ryūji inched closer and called out to her back,

"...~!"

"Whoa?!"

Without saying anything, Taiga's flowerish face twisted hatefully with pain and, looking like a yaksha, she started beating on Ryūji with the cushion. Trying to avoid the cushion that was being wildly swung about, Ryūji ran around pitifully,

"Cut it out, stop being so violent! You'll get dust everywhere!"

"Shuddup!"

It happened when he evaded the Palmtop Tiger's all-out cushion attack. Suddenly, the sliding door at Ryūji's back opened, but Taiga didn't stop. At the same time, being thoroughly surprised, his ugly pet Inko-chan tripled in ugliness and shouted.

"O, oi!"

However, the cushion attack didn't pause at all,

"Fuguh!...Eguh...gu, gu, gu..."

Bam! Her strike had connected cleanly - with the face of Ryūji's mother, the 30-something year old lolita-faced Yasuko who had stuck her head out past the opened sliding door. The cushion had hit the Takasu residence's central member, who had just now fallen asleep after having returned home at 8am, exhausted.

"S, s, s, sor, sor...~"

Expectedly, Taiga tossed aside the cushion and hurried over to Yasuko, who was holding her face, looking like she was about to cry. However, it seemed that Yasuko, who was shockingly wearing Ryūji's middle school gym shorts and a zebra-patterned camisole, wasn't able to handle such a surprise and suddenly collapsed right where she stood.

Looking at his mother's face, Ryūji was at a loss for words. Sensing that something was wrong, Taiga leapt

back. They suddenly figured it out. Just moments ago, the "Oi!" that Inko-chan had shouted, when written in kanji, was actually "Old!".

Yasuko had aged all of a sudden. Maybe it was the heat, or maybe it was lack of sleep, or maybe it was because she had fallen asleep drunk without removing any of her makeup, but her ordinarily plucky, feminine, and perfectly youthful skin was now wrinkled, having become tragically aged-looking.

"Wh, what's with that aged appearance... What the heck happened?! Hurry, go take some vitamins or something! Or apply something to your face, quick!"

"Fueeeh~... It's because you two were noisy, so I couldn't sleep~... If Yacchan can't sleep, she ends up getting older~..."

Seeing his mother shedding heavy tears, Ryūji couldn't say anything else.

The son and the freeloader kept apologizing profusely. To make sure she could sleep peacefully, they quickly left the house.

* * *

"...Here we go. Are you ready?!"

"Come at me anytime!"

They were at a park that was on the other side of Taiga ’s apartment.

Lined with the greenery of Japanese Zelkovas along the perimeter, the central area was generally dedicated to the park plaza. Owners who brought along their dogs were walking and chatting, while children who came en masse from a nearby daycare center to play were sitting in the shade of the trees going "I’m hot~" or "I’m tired~" and so on. The sound of a truck nearby was like an explosion, and although there was a breeze, it wasn’t all that different from the hot blast of a hair dryer.

It was the middle of a midsummer day that felt hot enough to broil a person’s eyeballs. Ryūji and Taiga were

both holding badminton rackets that they had borrowed from the landlady and were now facing off inside of a makeshift court they had drawn haphazardly with their fingernails. Perspiration heavy on their foreheads, their faces were feverishly reddened.

They were looking at one another with serious intent. When they stopped by her apartment, Taiga had opted against the flowing one-piece dresses she was always wearing and had changed into a t-shirt and shorts. She had even tied up her long hair and there was a flickering flame burning in her eyes.

"First one to three points wins. Win or lose, this is final , got it? The loser will... Well, you know, right?"

"Like I said, I accept already."

This wasn't just ordinary badminton. This was a game to decide the future. The loser would have to spend the whole trip supporting the winner.

With a strong scent of grass in the air, Ryūji casually toyed with the birdie, but secretly, he was chuckling to himself. He felt a bit sorry, but even if Taiga did have the reflexes of a wild animal (with the exception of swimming), it looked like he was going to be taking this

match. Despite how he might look, the truth was that Ryūji had been a member of the badminton club during middle school.

With just a rectangle divided in the middle for a makeshift court and no net, this match was going to be harsh. Once they drew the lines, that was pretty much it. Having decided the first serve with a game of rock-paper-scissors, they were going to play as quickly as possible so they could finish before they succumbed to heatstroke.

If they were going to call that nightmare a warning, then they really had to focus their energy, he supposed. They definitely didn't want things to turn out like that. Honestly, he didn't think any help from Taiga would really be help at all, but if he ended up having to support Taiga it would be a horrible drag. At the very least, he didn't want to be bothered. All of this was for the trip that he had been so looking forward to, all for a shining future together with Minori.

"Here I go!"

Tossing the birdie lightly into the air, Ryūji didn't hold back and swung the racket with all his might from the

very start. With a nice "thwap" sound, the shuttle was headed straight for an impact with the ground.

Or at least he was thinking that when,

"Yah~!"

Taiga had dashed forward like a beast, and while gouging out both grass and dirt, her racket just barely tapped the birdie upwards. Thinking "No way will I make it in time", the one who was scrambling now was Ryūji, who ran towards the birdie that was coming down just over the center line before he desperately dove for it without thinking.

With his last second save, the shuttle popped upwards in an arch and started coming back down, but Taiga just laughed with a "Fu". Taiga caught the slowly falling birdie with the center of her racket that she had raised overhead,

"...!"

"Oh yeah!"

She struck a victory pose. On the other hand, Ryūji was speechless. What the heck had just shot by him? A rocket?

"Come on now, what are you spacing out for! That's one point for me!"

Taiga was slicing the air with her racket and laughing, while the birdie laid behind Ryūji - or rather, it had been embedded. It was stuck in the soft ground.

"H, hey... Are you an experienced player?!"

He sensed that it wasn't exactly the problem here, but he just had to ask. Taiga calmly replied.

"Not really, I guess? But I attended a private girls' school for elementary and middle school, and I was in the tennis club the who~~le nine years. That *might* have something to do with it."

Fwoosh!

...It was an extremely fast, eye-opening swing. It was powerful enough that if she were holding a butcher’s knife instead of a racket, she could've sliced straight through a herd of stampeding buffalo. With a calm face, Taiga was saying things like "Ah, it’s hot, let’s get this over with" while fanning herself, but he was thinking " Wait a minute!". While Ryūji picked up the shuttle, he couldn’t help but reveal a nervously puzzled expression. What the heck? Doesn’t this mean that he actually doesn’t have the advantage at all? Even though this was a battle he couldn’t afford to lose.

"Well then, looks like I’m serving next."

"Y, yeah."

Wiping at his sweat-laden brow, he passed the shuttle over to Taiga while trying to look unconcerned. Playing with it for a while, Taiga lightly bounced the shuttle in the palm of her hand, and then,

"...Here it comes!"

She launched it high into the pure blue midsummer sky. Twisting her slender arm greatly, she used her whole body for leverage and raised her racket up high,

while Ryūji held his breath and glanced side to side trying to make sure he could get to it no matter where it might land...

"...Huh?!"

Going all out, she had swung and missed.

Taiga's racket cleanly sliced the air, the shuttle dropped sadly to the ground at her feet, and as for Ryūji,

"Oh yeah, that's one point, one point for me! Tied game, tied game!"

He had abandoned all maturity.

"No, no way, that doesn't count! Doesn't count!"

"Nope, can't do that. That's not allowed, you know?! Klutz~, klutz~!"

Frantically running over next to Taiga, he deftly used his racket to try and retrieve the fallen shuttle. However, he was grabbed by the back of his neck,

"Stop right there you, just what are you trying to pull?! That's sneaky, sneaky sneaky sneaky~!"

"How’s that?! You’re the one who dropped it! That’s not allowed! So it’s my serve!"

The two of them argued harshly for a while on the lawn. Jabbing each other with their rackets, Taiga beat on Ryūji with her fist as she tried to get back the birdie that was in his hand while Ryūji used his height advantage to guard by holding the shuttle with his fingertips, keeping his hand up high. Pressing back with his rear end, he was kind of wriggling about and moving around trying to keep away it from Taiga.

Gathering around to watch the two of them, a group of housewives, who seemed to have a lot of time on their hands while walking their dogs, were laughing heartily. " Look how active they are despite this heat~" "Just looking at that boy, you can tell he’s gone bad~" "Still, they’re so energetic~" "Don’t you think they’re going to collapse with heatstroke if they keep that up?"...All the dogs who were heartlessly brought along had their mouths open slovenly, panting "Ehe~he~he~", making it seem as if they were laughing.

However the two couldn’t spare any attention on such trivial details.

"Come on, give it back! We're redoing that last one!"

The now irritated Taiga had tossed aside her racket and, cracking her knuckles, took a sudden step forward. However,

"Yelp!"

The tossed racket had flown further than expected, landing with a "plop!" precisely on the head of a large dog within the group. Ryūji turned at the sound thinking "Oh crap". Taiga turned around as well, and the owner let out a loud cry.

"Ara, ara! Are you okay Chiko-chan?!"

"Gr~, grrr~..."

Not completely visible from where they stood, Chiko-chan, who didn't really seem all that okay as he looked up and stared at Taiga, was a huge, muscular, and dependable husky who probably warranted a " Beware of Dog" sign and had a double-coat fluffed out for midsummer.

He was staring at Taiga with an appearance just like that of Prajnaparamita. Wrinkling his nose, Chiko

stepped forward. His eyes were saying "You're responsible, aren't you? If you apologize, I'll be nice and forgive you."

Taiga gave a quick glance at Chiko. And then, turning instead to the owner who was standing behind him, she apologetically bowed her head slightly with seemingly sincere remorse.

Then looking back at Chiko with one eyebrow raised, she snorted with a "Hmph" while haughtily turning her face upwards. "I'll apologize to the owner, but I'm not going to lower my head to a dog", was what she was silently saying.

It happened at that moment.

"No, no, don't worry about it! Chiko might have this sort of charming face, but comple~tely different from how he looks, he can take care of himself and takes pride in his strength. My friends even call him Yokozuna Chiko... Ah~!"

Breaking free from his master's grip, Chiko dashed straight towards Taiga. The group of dog owners were screaming "Kyah~!", and even Ryūji instinctively began to hastily retreat at the sight of that Prajnaparamita face.

However, Taiga stood her ground, looking straight forward,

"You wanna go?!"

"Aoooh~!"

As they collided, she successfully caught the attack from the large-bodied Chiko.

At the grassy park plaza in midsummer, a high school girl whose height didn't really change that much whether she was sitting or standing was fiercely grappling with a Husky dog. Their strengths were matched, almost completely even. Chiko's hindlegs trembled while Taiga's shoes pressed into the ground. Just when it looked like a prolonged war had begun..., "... Tch!" "Woof!"... The girl and the dog, separating for the time being, quickly distanced themselves.

"Grr~", Chiko growled deeply. With his tail raised high and his body held low, he stared up at Taiga with his light blue eyes. Taiga responded with a growl of her own, focusing her harsh cattish eyes on him and keeping

both her arms loosely at the ready. With their eyes already devoid of reason, this was a fight between fellow beasts.

As if etching a circle, these two beasts went round and around while keeping a constant distance until, making the first move, Chiko lunged forward. Standing on his hindlegs and readying the large claws on his forelegs,

"Guh!"

He struck at Taiga's stomach. Staggering back and staring at Chiko,

"Now you've done it!"

"*Yelp!*"

Taiga countered with a slap to Chiko's nose.

"What the heck is she doing to that dog?!... I, I'm seriously sorry...!"

The uneasy one was Ryūji. Wondering how Taiga could do that to someone else's pet, he bowed his head hastily at the owner, but he didn't have the courage to actually try and get between those two beasts.

"N, no no... I'm the one who's really sorry. I wonder if she's okay, that little girl."

The owner, a middle-aged woman, was saying when, taking a glance at Ryūji's face, she blushed and said "Ara, how handsome". The other owners around were whispering "But aren't his eyes kind of strange?" "That woman, her tastes are strange after all" and things like that. *Please don't say that. It's like you're putting my face in the same category as Chiko's.*

In every sense of the phrase, the onlookers held their breath as they focused on the scene. The battle between Taiga and Chiko remained just about even. Smacking each other repeatedly, staring each other down, they were acknowledging that they were enemies,

"Yah!"

"Woof!"

They once again started grappling intensely.

Completely forgetting that Ryūji was there, Taiga fought with the heavily breathing dog like she was in a trance.

Thinking things over,

"...Hey Taiga. That point earlier didn't count after all, so I guess I'll serve."

Ryūji mumbled. Taiga looked up quickly,

"Eh?! Eh?! What was that just now?! I couldn't hear it over this stupid dog's loud breathing!"

It was fine by him if she didn't hear.

Going back to their makeshift court by himself with the birdie in hand, Ryūji just tapped the shuttle. It landed on Taiga's side. He went over and picked it up. Again, he hit it. It landed on Taiga's side. He walked over and picked it up. Then he hit it once more.

"...Okay, we're done. I got three points first, so it's my win. Looks like you'll be helping me on the trip."

"W, wha?! Wait you, deciding on your own like that, just what are you saying?! What a ridiculous... Geez, get off of me, I don't got time to play around with you!"

Getting back some of her rationality, Taiga tried to push Chiko away. However, while Chiko remained fully

entangled with Taiga, he had the features of Prajnaparamita (or something similar) and didn't show any signs of budging. It seemed like he was thinking that if he were to lose this battle of strength, then the pride he held so dear as yokozuna would be forfeited as well.

"Geez, come on already!... Ah, fine fine, I get it already, I give up, I give up! It was my fault! I'm apologizing, sorry! Okay, now get off! Get back!"

Despite Taiga saying all that and trying to back away, her actions appeared to have no effect on Chiko. Rather Taiga's face was quickly becoming red, and sweat was starting to pour off of her.

"You know... I, it's hot...hot! His fur is hot! Seriously hot, I'm going to die!"

Being so close to Chiko like that, she must have felt like she was wearing a fur coat while the sun continued to bake her.

Trying to wrench herself free from Chiko, Taiga twisted her body and shifted backwards. Matching her, Chiko stepped once with his hindlegs to close the distance. So then Taiga moved diagonally backwards. Chiko also followed with another wonderful one-step.

Looking at the desperate Taiga (and Chiko), Ryūji felt kind of bad, but in his eyes they looked just like they were dancing the salsa or something.

"What are those two doing... Don't you think they look quite coordinated?"

Perhaps moved by the scene, Chiko's owner slowly took out her cell phone and started capturing this weird dance between her dog and the neighborhood high school girl. Of course, she was taking a video.

"Get him off! Get this guy off of me! Ahh, his breath is hot too!"

It's the middle of summer. The sunlight that was mercilessly shining down and heating Chiko's fur coat was also burning up Taiga who was tightly entangled with him. With the tempo of the steps increasing, they started moving with an even more energetic rhythm. However, Taiga's eyes were on the verge of tears, and as sweat continued to pour off her and she became unsteady on her feet, Chiko started taking the leading steps,

"Gah~, I get it already! I understand! You guys win, all right! Ryūji, you're a dog too so get him off of me! Talk to him for me!"

So as she was turning, she ended up asking Ryūji for help.

"...So it's really fine that I won?"

One second, two seconds, she remained silent as she tried to come to a decision...She finally sighed reluctantly ,

"F... fine, that's just fine!"

Thanks to Ryūji and the owner's frantic efforts, Chiko reluctantly forgave Taiga, who had given up the match. And so, Ryūji had claimed victory.

To be honest, even though he might have won that match, Ryūji wasn't expecting much actual help from Taiga, who seemed to be a girl favored by the God of Clumsiness. He had even less hope of her actually putting in the effort.

However,

"...I've thought of a rea~lly good plan."

Taking refuge from the heat at Sudoba's, Taiga, with her T-shirt covered in paw prints, was drinking an iced milk tea as she looked up. "Welcome to Sudobucks" As the female college student worker's voice resounded, a faint voice whispered within the shop. By the way, this place is Sudou Coffee Bar. There isn't a "bucks" anywhere in the name.

Whisper, whisper, whisper, Taiga was speaking discreetly, and in the middle of swallowing some iced coffee, Ryūji's sanpaku eyes widened considerably.

"Seriously? I see, something like that... Well, you know , it's just, just how are we supposed to..."

"We'll do it."

Taiga pointed at both herself and Ryūji with her slender finger. Then she started speaking again.

"The way you did that match was totally sneaky, so I don't really want to cheer you on, and I don't think you suit Minorin, but anything's better than that nightmare,

so I'll help you out for real, this time at least... Well, rather than seeing that unbearable dream forever, wouldn't it be better to go for an honorable end? If you can die honorably and grow even just a little, then we shouldn't have to worry about that miserable future from our dream."

"...Wouldn't that mean I'd be dead?"

"Don't speak so egotistically. The you right now only has the potential to stack the explosives, hurt your back, be sent to the hospital, and moan while staring at the ceiling."

As she looked back at Ryūji who was sitting across from her, her large cattish eyes shook disdainfully with more intensity than the midsummer sun.

* * *

The day after the midday badminton confrontation, 6 am .

"...Okay!"

Checking the contents of the freezer in the dimly lit kitchen, Ryūji nodded reassuringly to himself.

He confirmed that there were five containers of cooked rice in stock and each one was wrapped together with the appropriate utensils. The side dishes weren't great, but he had set aside a variety of stuff either frozen or sealed.

"There are some things I want to tell you before I leave on this trip. It's rather complicated stuff, but listen to what I'm telling you. All right, I've already taken care of all the necessary cooking, okay? So please, please don't mess with any open flames."

"...U~..."

"The Caspian Sea Yogurt should be fine to eat now. There's a small jar that I'm trying to keep sterile for later, so don't touch that. Make sure you remember to stir the

nukadoko every day. You can put a plastic bag over your hand, so keep the thought of 'Thanks for everything' in mind and do it with utmost care. By the way, the cucumbers should be ready to be eaten around tonight and the eggplants should be fine by tomorrow.

"...U~..."

"Even if Inko-chan doesn't drink all his water, you have to change it at least in the morning and at night. Same thing with his food, change it at least twice a day. You also need to change the newspaper lining the bottom of the cage everyday. Talk to him a little, and cover him with the cloth before you leave for work so he'll have less to worry about."

"...U~..."

"The business with the bill collectors should be taken care of for now, so they shouldn't come. At least, I think they shouldn't... I wonder if they might. Well, just be kind of prepared."

In front of the rambling adviser, rather, her son who was giving her advice, the mother was swaggering all about without saying anything.

"Hey, did you really listen to all that? Did you understand it all? Try repeating it back to me."

"...Uu~~..."

As usual, they were in the dark 2DK residence untouched by the morning sun. The mother Yasuko's breath was still heavily tinged with the smell of alcohol. That was to be expected as she had just gotten home an hour ago, and then she had been lifted from her attempts at sleep and brought all the way to the kitchen.

Yasuko, who was still staggering, could only open her eyes about two millimeters. But, well, there are even people in the world who study while they sleep after all. The playback ended up as drooling moans, but at least she had replied whenever he said something, so he decided it was probably okay. Two years ago, he had left the house for four days and three nights to go on a middle school field trip. The laundry had piled up, take-out food containers had been stinking up the sink, and the organic waste still remaining had actually started fermenting, but both Yasuko and Inko-chan had survived at least.

"Well, I'm going."

"...Haba saftrip~...Eh?"

Possibly noticing just now that her son was carrying a bag and wearing a t-shirt and shorts, Yasuko suspiciously creased her brow and tilted her head.

"Ryū-tan... Where ya goin'...?"

"A trip. I'm pretty sure I told you before."

"...Tri...? Tri..."

Mumbling in a way that made it difficult to tell whether she understood or not, Yasuko nodded several times, mumbled something like "Trgh~", and then trudged back to her futon. Thinking "Oh well, maybe it'll be okay", Ryūji turned,

"Inko-chan... I'm going, okay?"

Walking over to the birdcage that was next to the window, he gently lifted the cloth covering the cage.

"...Ohh..."

Even on this morning when Ryūji was leaving, Inko-chan's shocking face was at max intensity.

Why won't his beak stay shut? Why is there foam-like stuff on his extruding tongue? Why are his eyes all white and also slightly off? Why does he keep having convulsions? Those questions remain unanswered even now.

Still, even if he did look grotesque, there was no doubt he was their dear pet, so looking at him lovingly, Ryūji changed the water and food,

"Well... Off I go!"

Getting up, Ryūji took the bag that he had carefully packed with everything he might need and slung it over his shoulder.

When he opened the creaking door of the entrance hall , the still refreshingly nice summer morning breeze cooled Ryūji's eyelids. He hadn't been able to tell from inside the house, but the weather was good.

High up in the sky, the cumulonimbus clouds were already starting to look agitated, signaling that today was going to be hot.

By the time that happened, they'd probably be at the villa already. His mouth twisted in excitement just thinking about it.

Well then, it's going to be three days and two nights. He wondered what kind of fun things were waiting. What would he talk about with Minori and how much closer would they be able to become? And it had been a while since he had met with Kitamura too. When he thought about Ami and Taiga starting a fight, he suddenly got a worrisome premonition, but this was summer vacation after all. On this short unsupervised trip, there would probably be lots of exciting things to do surely.

He descended the stairs while keeping his steps light in fear of bothering the landlady, and then he began the short walk underneath the early morning sky towards the neighboring apartment.

Thinking "Since it's her, she's probably still not done preparing", he had left the house early, but,

"...Ah."

Taiga had looked up as she spotted Ryūji while standing on the stairs near the marble entrance.

"Hey, what's this I see? How unusual, so you actually came out early?"

"...It just happened that way I guess."

Considering it "just happened", Taiga was wearing a brand-new mint green dress, her hair was well-groomed with only the sides done in braids, and she had applied light-colored lipstick. Faced with her freshness that was like a blooming rose on this summer morning, he looked away feeling somewhat embarrassed. Nevertheless, he raised his left hand in greeting, and she returned the gesture.

Even if she had said she was going to fully support him, this was still a trip with the guy she liked. He and Taiga were definitely the same, having both been snapped awake by their excitement. Ryūji began to feel an urge to smile, so to hide it, he started walking off ahead of her.

The meeting time was fifteen minutes from now. They' d make it even if they took their time walking, but they just happened to feel like rushing.

And so, having finally made their way somewhat ahead of time to the ticket gate of the station where everyone was supposed to meet, what greeted the two was,

"...Hm?"

"...Wait, that's... Minorin...isn't it? Huh?"

The place wasn't packed, but by no means was it empty either as travelers and their accompanying families and business men on business trips traversed back and forth, and in the middle of it all, that person was standing there.

"Mo~rning~!"

Ryūji and Taiga were looking at a beaming girl with a flexible build, none other than Minori Kushieda. Right when Minori noticed them, she moved carefully into a

wide stance, bent her knees, and tilted her upper body forward, and then she started slowly turning like she was drawing a circle with her face. And then following her while performing the same turn, a familiar face with glasses appeared from behind her.

"Hey! Good job on not being late, you two!"

Faced with the two who continued their back-to-back circular motion, Ryūji and Taiga just stood there speechless. While the people around were blatantly staring at the odd youths, a couple of businessmen in their thirties were commenting "That's from Zoo" "Those are Zoo movements" as they smiled nostalgically.

The pair of softball club captains, Minori and Kitamura , continued to switch places as they moved like a propeller,

"Hahaha, we're standing out too much! Too much, Kitamura-ku~~n!"

"And after we went and practiced this too."

The two split up left and right while smiling and laughing happily, patting each other on the back and complimenting themselves on a job well done.

"Nice dance!", "Nice Zoo!" ...It looked like it wasn't just Ryūji and Taiga who were feeling fervent anticipation for the trip.

"...It seems you guys are energetic even early in the morning, huh... And what exactly is 'Zoo'?"

"Don't worry about it, don't worry. I was excited and arrived early, and Kitamura-kun happened to be here early too."

"There was a mirror over there, so for some reason we ended up practicing that sort of a greeting."

"How ridiculous, seriously... Hey, Glasses, it's been a while."

"Hey hey, Sanpaku Eyes!"

To be honest, even while he was saying stuff like that as he bumped sides with Kitamura, Ryūji was thoroughly fixated on Minori Kushieda's smile.

Stopping her strange dance, Minori shined like a child of the sun amidst the morning light. While messing with Taiga's hair and being sniffed at by Taiga, she shined more brightly than anyone else.

Dressed simply in knee-length shorts and a short-sleeved hoodie, she was incredibly cute. Perhaps exposed to more sun than the last time he'd seen her, just Minori's cheeks and the tip of her nose were blushed red like a child's and her eyes were drawn to slits as she laughed. Her appearance was almost too much to bear, at least for Ryūji. The way she had her sack slung over one shoulder was cute, her thin ankles above her sneakers were cute, and as she smiled and laughed with supreme joy, her face was too radiant for him to even look at directly.

"Hm? What's the matter Takasu-kun! It's our long-awaited trip, so don't hold back and speak up!"

"Y, yeah."

After Minori heartily smacked him on the back, he went from being stuck in a daze to being struck by

nerves and trembling. Meeting again after such a long time, the time apart had simply added to his nervousness .

On the other hand, if he took a look at Taiga who was beside him,

"But you know, Aisaka, it’s been a while, hasn’t it? We haven’t seen each other since the closing ceremony."

"Ah, eh, uh..."

As she was spoken to by Kitamura, who was also smiling, she stood there like a wooden stick. Perhaps it was supposed to be part of an "I’m not like I usually am" appeal or maybe it was just her being nervous, but she was playing with her braids while seeming unable to even return a greeting. Also, she was looking around like she was paranoid and repeatedly opening and closing her mouth. Maybe she just couldn’t find the right words.

"By the way, is Kawashima still not here?"

It wasn’t like he was intending to help her, but breaking the silence, Ryūji spoke to Kitamura.

"Looks like it. She hasn't sent an e-mail, but it's still a bit before the designated meeting time."

"Is that so... Hmph, if that's the case... Everyone, gather up!"

Minori called Taiga, Ryūji, and Kitamura over in front of the mirror. "Eh?!" "No!" Ryūji and Taiga's voices were overtaken and swallowed up by Minori's "Now now, come on", so then...

Appearing at the gate a few minutes late,

"Huh, where is everyone... Hm?... Hmm?!"

Ami Kawashima minutely shifted her sunglasses that covered nearly half of her petite face. Her lips that resembled petals were cutely agape, and she appeared to be speechless.

"...Hey Kawashima."

"You're two minutes late, Ami."

"Morning Ami~n!"

"...I'm not doing this by choice. It's because Minorin told me to do it."

All standing in a line ordered by height starting from Ryūji followed by Kitamura, then Minori, and finally Taiga, each of them extended their arms and wiggled them at their different heights. From Ami's perspective, it would have seemed as though Ryūji had eight arms.

"...I wonder where. I wonder just where is everyone..."

"Hey, Kawashima!"

"Ami, we're right here!"

"Amin, where are you going?!"

"Don't run away, you stupid Chihuahua!"

"...I wonder where, wonder where..."

Acting like she had no idea who they were, she quickly fled. The four of them chased after her, waving their arms spectacularly, and went to chase her down.

Considering they only spent five minutes practicing, it was a wonderful likeness of Asura - or at least, that's how Minori chose to remember it afterward.

Chapter 2

It would take about one and a half hours by limited express to get to Ami's villa.

Although it was summer, it wasn't Obon season which may have explained why the unreserved seats were only half occupied at most. After the five of them secured adjacent three-person seats and moved one to face one another, their group seating was complete.

Ami quickly and carelessly tossed her overnight bag, a super high-class brand name item, into an overhead compartment,

"Iyaah~! It's been so long everyone! Have you all been doing well? Ah~, Minori-chan, I've wanted to see you~!"

Smoothly flipping up her beautifully flowing hair, which had a light tint that might have been limited only to summer break, she turned to Minori with an angelic smile while acting like she might cry from nostalgia. " Saying that even after you ran away from me." Minori's half-jest of a tsukkomi went thoroughly ignored.

"Ah Yūsaku~, I guess you're the same as always~! Isn't that right, Glasses! Ahaha~!"

To her childhood friend Kitamura, she spoke with a superficial sweetness while casting careless smiles about, and then,

"And Takasu-kun!"

Spinning around, she practically dove right into Ryūji's chest as she moved closer to him and smi~~led... Her face was puffed up like an innocent baby's. Ryūji unconsciously took a step back. Still showing that babyish smile, Ami followed up with a step forward that left Ryūji with nowhere to run.

"Aww man~~! Hey, hey, just what happened to you during the break? You didn't call or message me at all! I was so bored!"

"...You, I'm pretty sure you never told me your number or email address..."

"Hu~h, really? Fufu, never mind all that, this trip should be fun... Don't you think? I'm looking forward to it, aren't you?"

As Ami lowered her voice while disregarding Ryūji's response, a wicked flame burned within her eyes that

were directed only at Ryūji. On top of that, she slid her cold fingers discreetly onto Ryūji's wrist.

Her almost overly long limbs were sporting a simple tank-top and jeans, and the style of her eight-head figure was attracting quite a bit of attention today as well. "You know, I'm pretty sure I've seen that girl before" "She's gotta be a model, don't you think?" and so on. Overhearing the pair of college girls, she smiled rather happily, nodding,

"Ah, oh no! Today, I only put on sunscreen after I washed my face. I'm not wearing any makeup! Ah geez, and my skin's not all that pretty... This is horrible~~..."

Ami sandwiched her utterly smooth milk-colored face with both hands, slanting her eyebrows as if she were actually worried. *No makeup and still that pretty*... She was immersed in a shower of envious glares from all sides,

"Well, we're on a trip after all! It's not necessary to have makeup, right? Just or-di-na-ry!"

Kyaha! It was the finishing blow. Gathering even the blameless women on the train who weren't actually going heavy on the makeup and crushing them all at once, Ami's pretty face became even more dazzlingly

radiant, like a vampiress feasting on the blood of her victims. Her large Chihuahua-like eyes shimmered, and her petite, unadorned, yet menacing face that seemed to consist of only milky white and rose red hues possessed the loveliness of an angel. Emitting an aura that seemed to be screaming "I, am, so, beau-ti-ful! All you normal women, be thankful that you get to breathe the same air as me, the chosen Ami-sama! Gahaha! Feel free to worship me~!", Ami seemed to be in fine form today as well.

Finishing up,

"Ah, oh yeah, Takasu-ku~n, it looks like Aisaka-san hasn't gotten here yet, so don't you think you should call her? Although I don't care at all if she decided not to come~"

She completely ignored Taiga, who was right in front of her and, showing him a somewhat troubled expression , sidled up next to Ryūji. Just then, the train started moving,

"Hey, sit down, tramp."

"Ah!"

Ami fell on her behind onto a seat by the window. Coming from the front with her fingers, Taiga's blinding stab attack had pierced both her eyes, practically embedding them up to the first joint.

(!)

"...Th... That hurts...~?!"

"Since your eyes are that useless, I just thought I would remove them for you. I'm right here you know."

"...E, ehh~... You're so small that I guess I didn't see you..."

"They really are useless after all, aren't they?"

Preparing for another attack (all the way to the knuckle this time), Taiga made a sinister V with her small hand, but

"Now now! That's enough for today. Just look into my eyes!"

It was halted by Minori, who got in between the two and pulled at her pretty double eyelids with her fingertips, as though she was trying to look foreign.

Reacting in astonishment, Ryūji's eyes became weird as well, but showing no surprise,

"You too Minorin, don't make such a weird expression and sit down or you'll fall down."

Taiga lectured before making Minori sit next to Ami. After that she forcefully took Ryūji's hand as he stood in the aisle and practically threw him into the seat next to Minori before sitting down opposite Ami. Wondering if this was Taiga showing her support, Ryūji felt somewhat moved by her actions. That just left Kitamura to sit opposite from Minori; in other words, he'd be sitting next to Taiga, but she was sticking as close as possible to the window and remaining diligently fixated on Ami while practically ignoring Kitamura's existence.

"Wow, what oppressive intent... You're short, but you're like a thick wall or something..."

Acting disgusted, Ami looked away, but,

"Well since I'm so small, it shouldn't feel all that oppressive, right?"

Planting her legs down with a bang, Taiga continued to stare harshly at Ami's face. And then,

"Ah. Bakachi~"

Taiga called out the shortened form of "Stupid Chihuahua", her personal nickname for Ami.

"Could you possibly be talking about me?!"

"What horrible creases."

"Ehh...?!"

Pointing towards Ami's eyes, she seemed to be indicating the physical flaw. Following along, even Minori turned to stare intently at Ami's face,

"Eh, Amin wouldn't have a thing like that on her beautiful skin, would s... Ohh..."

As if saying "I am so sorry", she bowed deeply. For some reason, Kitamura returned a polite nod, as if saying "No need to apologize, thank you for worrying". Now that it had been mentioned, even Ryūji could certainly see that Ami's ordinarily perfect, radiantly rosy skin had the tiniest bit of discoloration just beneath her eyes.

"What's up with you... You're kinda wrinkling. Are you not getting enough sleep?"

"W, wait, wha, even Takasu-kun, looking at someone's face and saying 'crease' or 'wrinkle' is just... For there to be things like that on my skin is... Ahh!"

Pulling out her compact makeup mirror and peering at her own pretty face, Ami had let out a loud scream. The mirror slipped from her hands.

Then, as she gently touched the skin around her eyes with her trembling fingertips, even her voice became thoroughly shaky.

"Ahh, what the heck is this... I can't believe it. Well, I know I've been busy recently, like really busy, but... Ahh geez, what do I do... Maybe I should just die..."

Holding her forehead and closing her eyes, she really seemed to be in shock. Grabbing ahold of her shoulder, Minori tried to shake her back to her senses.

"A~min, get it together! What in the world's happened ?!"

"...When break started, I went all the way back home and I'd been working hard over there the whole time. So, after finally getting off from work, I had planned on taking the last train to get back here yesterday but just barely missed it. In the end, I had to ride the earliest train this morning. I only slept for three hours... Haa~..."

Aww, Minori and Kitamura's expressions softened with pity. Even Ryūji felt the same way, but if he tried to change his expression like them, it would only be mistaken for murderous intent or maybe insanity. As for Taiga, she tried to touch the crease in question with her outstretched hand, much to Ami's annoyance.

"I see, that must have been just horrible A~min. So then I guess your summer vacation is just these next few days?"

Ami responded to Minori's kind words by saying, " That's right".

"Okay then... If it's like that, we have to go all out and make sure Ami enjoys herself on this trip. All right everyone, you don't let the batters go in whatever order they want, you know. We have to create a lineup. And so , let's have the guys' army go for a homerun with a fun

conversation to alleviate Ami's woes. Alright, give it your all!"

Despite what she said, there were only two members in this army. The first to go was Kitamura, who was sitting opposite Minori,

"The batting order, eh... Well, why don't we try a debate with a common topic. Though I wonder, what kind of topic would Ami want to discuss? Maybe about the pennant races this year, or the Koushien situation, or since we're going to be preparing for exams next year, how about we talk about the declining college enrollment ?"

He struck out by a mile. It was Ryūji's turn next.

"Who'd want to talk about that sort of stuff... Anyway, let's have some breakfast. I brought some onigiri."

"No way, seriously?! Woohoo~, awesome!"

Practically leaping up, Minori clapped her hands. Taiga, who was next to her and Ami, who was saying " Onigiri?! Mm, that might be good! I haven't had anything to eat or drink all day after all!", both had a bright look in their eyes. Even Kitamura looked surprisingly pleased as

he repositioned his glasses. You might even be able to say that he got the first hit at his first at-bat.

Opening the cloth-wrapped container that he had taken out from his luggage, he started handing out a couple to each of them. Staying as far away as possible from Kitamura, Taiga basically crawled on her stomach over Ami, "H, hey!" and Minori, "Wow, I can feel your chest", stuck out her hands and got her rice balls from Ryūji. Holding them in both hands, she went back to her seat looking happy.

Minori took a bite out of one of hers, and then immediately with total delight exclaimed,

"Uwah~, it's so good! Did Takasu-kun make these?! Onigiri, onigiri, they're so totally delicious! Ah, and there's a plum in here! Yay plums! It's a homerun right off the bat!"

Flailing her legs wildly, she repeatedly kicked Kitamura in the leg as he sat across from her. Yet even as he was being kicked, Kitamura was also in a good mood saying "Oh, this really is good".

"Riding on a train, eating something simple like onigiri is the best~! As expected of Takasu-kun... Be my wife?"

Her large eyes shimmering, Ami said something that brought back memories of that nightmare,

"I won't."

He replied without hesitation. He didn't have time to be lured in by this Chihuahua with rice on her lips. Glancing sideways at Ami, whose eyes looked cold as she clicked her tongue "Tch", Ryūji quickly put on a nonchalant expression.

"Anyway, what did you guys do for summer vacation? "

Aiming for a homerun with a fun conversation... wasn't his goal; this was the setup that he had planned out with Taiga beforehand.

"Oh man, I had to work the who~le time."

The one who had spoken and was going "Ahh, I'm so tired" was Ami. Next, even while she was still chewing,

"Club, work, club, club, workworkwork, club, club, club, work."

That was Minori, the excessive part-time worker. Kitamura nodded in agreement,

"I was also swamped with club and student council, day in and day out. And last year, my great-grandfather passed away, so I went for the memorial service in my hometown too."

Next would be Taiga. *Do it*, Ryūji's glance told her. *I know*, Taiga slightly nodded,

"I made an MP3 compilation of ghost voices that were caught on CD. Here Minorin, listen."

She gently took out the white earphones she had prepared in her bag and then stuck a bud into each of Minori's ears. With the volume up high, an infamous sound, a mysterious voice saying "♪...Senpa~~i...♪" could be overheard as the recording played back. At the same moment, "Buh!", something came flying out of Minori's mouth. Moving just like a bullet, it shot straight forward and smacked Kitamura in the forehead. Kitamura held his injured forehead, moaning and hiding his face when a seed fell between his knees. It was the plum seed that Minori had spat at him.

"S... Sorry, Kitamura-kun! Or rather... What the heck Taiga?!"

Apologizing to Kitamura, yanking out the earphones, and scolding Taiga, Minori's face was in a sudden flux. Even her voice was out of balance.

"Sorry~"

Taiga shrugged as she spoke, but,

"You're not sorry at all, are you?! What was that just now?! It was 'that', wasn't it?! Like, being called from the underworld by a dead underclassman... A,a,ah, ah! What do I do, I'm the one who was called! I'm going to be dragged into Hell too! Or rather, the grudge continues!"

"Now now Kushieda, calm down... First off, do something about this seed please."

"Oh my bad, Kushieda SEED Destiny."

While returning the plum seed to Minori, he turned to Taiga with a sincere smile.

"Aisaka, you actually like that sort of horror?"

"Eh?!... N... Asking if...I...like it...or not... I guess, I do... ?"

"Ehh, how surprising!"

After taking the impact of his smile from point-blank range, Taiga was rather flustered as she started picking at the rice on her fingertips. Climbing up out of her seat and sitting on top of Ami's knees, Minori grabbed Taiga by the shoulder and shook her,

"Wha?! Isn't this the first I've heard of this?! You don't really like that sort of thing, right?!"

Minori fell into a state of denial. Shouting, even though they were in public, her entire face became red as she started acting wildly. She completely ignored Ami's weak, troubled moan of, "Heavy..." coming from beneath her.

Seeing her like this, Taiga and Ryūji exchanged glances and nodded slightly to each other. It really did seem like Minori couldn't handle horror-related things.

That's right... Taiga was thinking, with the goal of this trip being what it was, this would be their greatest plan yet. Entitled "Operation Make Minori Scared, And Then the Knight Appears".

"Minori, you know, she just can't handle horror stories, ghosts, or anything occult. That's what she said during the self-introductions when we just entered high school at least. She'd get goosebumps just from seeing the sign for a scary movie in town, so I think it might be true..." That was the information Taiga had leaked to him at Sudoba's.

And so during this trip, Ryūji and Taiga would work together, taking up the roles of spirits to scare Minori near to death. And then, just when she neared her limit on fear, Ryūji would make his appearance. "It's okay because if anything pops up, I'll protect you!" The spiritual phenomena would then stop showing up completely and Minori would be overwhelmed by relief.

"Takasu-kun, you really did protect me... Takasu-kun, you're like my personal genie..." or something like that. If

they could pull off something so dramatic, even if it was a bit detestable, it seemed like it had a good chance of closing their distance.

Oblivious to their scheming, Minori yelled out, "I'm confiscating this!", took Taiga's iPod and put it in her own pocket,

"Geez, Taiga... Anyway, no more scary stories allowed! No more weird things either! Rather than stuff like that, we're trying to cure Amin's fatigue, so let's get things going with more appropriate conversation, with more wonderful or academic topics! For instance, what do you like to put in your onigiri? Or maybe about your childhood or ramen or animals and stuff like that!"

"Ah, I know, since you were talking about scary stories , you know last week I,"

Suddenly opening her mouth, Ami took hold of Minori who was riding her knee like a child. Minori shook her head wildly.

"Nonononononono! That's not necessary! Ami, it's fine if you don't tell that kind of story!"

"Oh no, this isn't a scary story like that. It's funny, a funny story!"

Smiling, Ami began speaking softly into Minori's ear.

"...So this is a story about last week, when I was at a certain studio for a magazine photo shoot.

Wanting to fix my makeup, I had gone back to the waiting room. The makeup room at that studio was horribly cramped and though it had a sink, it looked rea~lly old. The piping was bare, the lighting was poor, and the mirror was kind of broken, so I didn't really like it at all. But, it's not like I could choose where to go.

Well, the makeup person had told me to go remove the makeup I was wearing first, so with no other options, I had just entered that makeup room by myself when I saw it... It looked like blood.

On the sink, the mirror, the floor, all over...bloody stains. So red, and I could smell it clearly, the stench of blood, it was probably, no, definitely...blood. But whose was it?"

"...How scary..."

Covering her face with both hands, Minori looked like her spirit had been sapped from her body. Her eyes were opened extraordinarily wide as if asking "Are you serious or just joking?". She was starting to slide off of Ami's lap as her body went slack. Ami firmly held onto Minori and pulled her back up,

"Oh oops~, sorry, sorry!"

Smiling brightly, Ami began rocking Minori on her knee like she was trying to soothe a child,

"It wasn't like that at all, there's a punchline, a punchline! Ahaha, because the blood, it was just from a staff member's nosebleed! The cameraman at the time was a difficult guy; a middle-aged man who would swing his camera around violently, and so one of the

staff members took it to the face, like really hard, to where his nose got bent completely sideways! It's like, how ridiculous~!"

"Ahahaha", as Ami carelessly laughed by herself, her voice echoed within the shaky express train. Remaining silent, the only thing that Ryūji could think was that her punchline had been rather distasteful.

"...S, so that's how it was~... That's not so bad~..."

Looking up while still being held by Ami, Minori wiped the perspiration that had appeared on her brow during her agitation.

"And there I was, thinking for sure that a bizarre murder had taken place upstairs, and the chopped up corpse had gone down the drain, and getting clogged along the way, the pipes had ruptured, and the victim's blood and flesh had spouted from the drain of that room's sink and were dripping all over...Like, pieces of flesh that had turned into pork filet-looking slabs with human hair thoroughly mixed in, and teeth scattered about, and... Uwah, so scary~!"

And so Minori quickly experienced another cold sweat . Remaining silent this time though, Ami casually set

Minori aside, back onto her original seat. The group was shrouded in an eerie silence.

Rather than Ami's story, the horrible punchline, or any of that, Minori's imagining was so much more disconcerting, but... it was just her imagination. However , Minori didn't stop there. Futilely twisting her arms in distress,

"And then, then you know, the eyeball goes like 'Pah!' and pops up, then what am I supposed to do if I see it...? Huh Taiga, and what's more, what if I end up like that? Huh Ami, what do I do?! Noo, I don't want to end up in a drain!"

"I don't want to die like tha~~t!" Minori held her fidgeting arms between her legs and wailed. Seeing Minori like that, Ryūji's eyes were glinting like an over-sharpened knife. But it wasn't like he he was considering acting on this occasion. He had just been thinking to himself.

Apparently, she was that type of person. Maybe what you'd call a self-destructive coward? Gradually thinking up scary thoughts on her own, she was the type who would eventually terrify herself. In any case, with Ami's

unwitting assistance, the plan to make Minori scared was off to a good start.

Suddenly at that moment,

"Ohh!"

Kitamura spoke up.

As the brightness increased outside the window, first Ami who was near the window, then Taiga and Ryūji, and lastly Minori too, all looked up. The color quickly returned to her face and her eyes began sparkling like they usually did.

"W...Wow! We made it! It's so beautiful!"

Outside the window of the train carrying the five of them, the midsummer sun shined along the horizon of the sparkling blue Pacific Ocean, making the water shimmer even more brightly.

Beneath the azure summer sky, the bright blue-filled August setting extended beautifully as far as the eye could see.

* * *

"To-ta-lly AWESOME~!!!" "Awesome~, some~, m~..". Minori's voice resounded up to the heavens.

Getting off at the station closest to the villa, they walked for a good twenty minutes down a road that seemed to curve widely around a mountain.

After making their way out of some trees along the sand-strewn path, the scene before them suddenly brightened when they saw it.

"You know, I'm sorry for making all of you walk like this~."

Ami turned to look back at them. "Seriously", Taiga growled, but the other three, Minori, who had just finished shouting to her heart's content, Ryūji and Kitamura were now speechless. Simply standing

motionlessly with their eyes wide open and huddled together naturally like little timid animals, they continued to stare in awe at the scenery below them.

They had heard that it was a villa by the sea, but...they hadn't expected it to be anything like this.

"...Y, you really are rich after all, aren't you... It might be a crude thing to say, but that really struck home just now... I probably shouldn't be surprised since Ami's house was three times as large as my own..."

Just barely getting out what he wanted to say, Kitamura was shaking his head in amazement.

"Oh come on now Yūsaku, what are you talking about ? This is just ordinary, or-di-na-ry."

So then, does that make us below average? Well in any case , this wasn't the time to be sulking.

The small path that extended out of the woods continued along towards descending stone steps. And beyond those steep steps was the sea.

With the shimmering white sand and the clear deep blue sea, the waves continued to undulate beneath the intense light that beamed down from the midsummer sky and the ocean spray scattering like stars. Everything was bright and glittery. The scenery extending to the

edge of the Pacific Ocean was simply picturesque, while the scent of salt pervading the moist breeze and the sound of the gently beating waves were just enough to bring it all into reality.

With the beach completely deserted, the transparent waves were unopposed as they shimmered beautifully, continuing along the cove that was surrounded by a rocky precipice. It wouldn't be a surprise if the whole beach belonged to the Kawashima family.

The beach was simply fantastic, like a paradise. The sound of the waves continuously washing back and forth , the sound of the wind, the smell of summer, the rays of the sun, and then...there was the mansion.

A wooden deck portruded outwards towards the beach, while on the other side, like a European petit hotel , the entrance was built of elegant white stone. It was unclear exactly how expansive it was as the branches from the erosion-countering trees prevented a full view of the building, but even so, it was a sight to behold. There were dry stone walls that were generally not found in Japan, the crinum that were scattered along the beach

had spread greenly underfoot throughout the premises with flowers that blossomed pink and the windows were positioned at twice the height of a normal house.

"W, w, w,"

Stepping forward onto the stone staircase,

"We really get to stay here?!"

Turning around with considerable force, Minori leapt towards Ami. Her bag whirled around at the same time, nearly swiping Ryūji and Kitamura in the face. The two guys barely escaped danger by instinctively pulling their heads back.

"Come on now Minori-chan. Of course! Isn't that to be expected?"

"Kyah! Uwah, wah, wonderful, it's too wonderful! I'm so deeply moved! Being allowed to stay at a place like this is a dream come true! Ohh, let's hurry up and go, Amin, Taiga! You too, boys' squad!"

"Ahaha, come on now, you're making too much of a fuss~!"

Despite her words, Ami didn't really seem all that annoyed with Minori's ecstatic demeanor. Making use of her long legs, Ami took off with leisurely leaps after Minori who practically flew down the stone steps as if free-falling.

"Ah, wait! Be careful, girls! Don't trip!"

Even Kitamura started running down the stairs, chasing after the two girls,

"...You'd definitely trip, so don't rush, okay?"

"Ehh? Just when have I ever tripped?"

Just as Taiga was about to take off after the two, Ryūji grabbed her by the back of her neck. Not only was she just a klutz, but it looked like she was suffering from amnesia now too.

"Walk down carefully. The sand can make you slip, so watch your step."

Holding the displeased Taiga by the elbow, he tried to slowly assist her down the steps but,

"You're too close, you seihanzaisha!"

"Se, se...~?!"

"Sex offender! Just what are you imagining, you pervert?!"

Taking advantage of his momentary confusion, she yanked her arm free. Then with a 'Bam!', Taiga violently smacked Ryūji on the back, knocking him away,

"Ah!"

As Ryūji just barely caught himself after falling forward a couple steps, she struck a haughty pose behind him. She stared down viciously at Ryūji with her piercing gaze,

"Walk in front of me. Then, in the unlikely event that I happen to fall, you can use your body to stop me. Only in that case will I give you permission to touch me."

She was acting so arrogantly. Still feeling a cold sweat all over, Ryūji stood motionless and dumbfounded,

"Y...you're so unbelievable, I'm simply speechless... Just now, I felt like my heart might've stopped..."

"You're speaking right now, aren't you? You're such a chatterbox... Cut it out!"

"Eh?!"

"Shut it! Close your mouth!"

He was caught in the storm of her self-indulgent verbal abuse.

Noticing the two in a hot state of sorts, Minori spun around,

"Ooh~, Taiga and Takasu-kun are getting heated~... Ahhh!"

Making fun of the two by pointing and implying that sort of thing, she missed the last step in magnificent fashion. She ended up diving face first into the beach, flopping with her limbs outstretched on the burning sand .

"Ho~~tttt~!"

"Mi, Minori-chan, are you okay?!"

Ami hastily ran over to her, but,

"I'm fi~ne! It's just that the friction and hot sand burned my face a little!"

Rolling forward and getting up with a smile and a victory pose, she disregarded the human-shaped imprint she had left in the sand, turned towards the villa's wood deck, and took off running wildly once again while shouting things like, "Railroad Charge!".

On the other hand,

"Ohh...the sand's getting in my sandals..."

After she'd finally gotten down the stone steps, it was a mystery as to where Taiga's earlier vigor had gone as she was acting rather timid; she kept stopping when her sandals filled with sand and tried to shake her legs futilely one at a time.

"If you're worried about that sort of thing, then you can't walk on the beach, can you?"

Walking in front of her, Ryūji had spoken, but she just scowled and moaned that the sand was hot. She simply would not take another step. Exasperated, he thought "

What a stubborn girl. I don't even know what to do anymore" when,

"What's wrong, Aisaka? You okay? I'll take your stuff for you."

"Ah..."

Kitamura suddenly appeared and very deftly took Taiga's large bag off her hands. Effortlessly carrying two bags, it was easy to see that his arms were surprisingly muscular,

"Do your feet hurt? We did walk quite a bit... Sorry that I didn't notice."

Peering at Taiga's face with a concerned look, his handsome eyes practically overflowed with kindness.

"I, it's not a problem! I'm fine!"

"Really? Well then, let's go!"

He started walking before Taiga, who was still shaking her head, but rather than leaving her behind, Kitamura made sure to keep an eye on her, walking at a slow reserved pace.

Of course, Taiga's face was completely red; with an expression caught between a smile and torment, she was practically trembling as she grit her teeth so forcefully that her face looked hollow. Her back stiffened up like a board and her right arm and right leg were moving synchronously, but at least she was finally walking.

Introspectively, Ryūji pondered his own shortcomings. He wasn't able to show such suave kindness to girls like Kitamura could and he didn't have such an attractive physique either. If only he were the sort of guy who could pull it off, he'd have done the same thing with Minori. If he could've just smoothly taken Minori's bag for her, saying something like "Your face got burnt, didn't it? I'm so sorry I wasn't able to protect you when you fell"...But the reality was, he had only been able to watch as she fell down, laughed it off, got back up, and then took off running.

So it's hopeless, *I'm not getting anywhere*, were among other thoughts. He was spiraling into depression when,

"No one's been here yet this year, so unless we do some cleaning, it might be kind of dusty."

"Wha~t?!"

Hearing what Ami said after she dropped her bags onto the wooden deck, Ryūji looked up suddenly.

"D... Did you say cleaning?!"

His sanpaku eyes that looked dangerous even under ordinary circumstances were glinting, burning with a gradually growing lust. "Cleaning sucks, why don't we just set everything on fire, let it all burn to ashes" ...was not even close to what he was thinking. He actually liked cleaning. Actually, Ryūji absolutely loved cleaning.

Take, for example, a floor caked in dust. He loved how the cleaning rag would turn pitch black with just that first wipe. Or when areas exposed to water had been left alone for quite a while, becoming sludged with black mold... The moment when he'd go check with mold killer in hand while wondering just how bad things had gotten over time, he enjoyed that too.

Inserting the scrubbing brush into a dirtied drain and pulling out the filth stuck inside was enough to make him shiver with pleasure. After scrubbing the bath heater where red yeast had ended up proliferating, that moment when he'd wonder "Is it really clean?" and hear it squeak cleanly as he checked it with his fingers was simply

irresistible. When he saw black mold in crevices, he'd exclaim things like, "I've had enough already, geez", but would have an irrepressible smile of ecstasy on his lips.

And so, he couldn't help but love having his home in immaculate condition. He'd keep everything so sanitary that he wouldn't even need to hesitate if someone told him to lick the floor. And keeping all the equipment easily accessible and facilitating the process of chores and cleaning, he deeply loved arranging everything in perfect order so that he could maintain a constantly spotless environment. There was no asking why. Throughout the world, just as there are those who like anime, those who like games, those who like music, and even those who might devote themselves to idols, so too would there be those whose passion was cleaning.

On a somewhat related note, Ryūji's secret hobby was to flip through overseas interior design magazines. If he only had the money to spare, he would love to get a full color complement of those luxurious fabrics and linens. His desire to experience such elegance was somewhat mitigated by his daily practice of helping out with chores at Taiga's deluxe apartment, but,

"So great~... It's almost too much..."

Instinctively bringing his hands up to his face like a young woman might, he looked over the villa in awe. He would actually get to clean such a mansion...

It was just as he would expect of the underdog homicide detective Reiko Yuuzuki's villa. It just felt absolutely right, unlike the gaudiness of the typical Japanese nouveau riche. The interior must be just as extraordinarily elegant, and yet it was probably all covered in dust, just waiting for Ryūji. "Ah~", he sighed, depositing his bag on the wooden deck.

"Okay... If it's cleaning, I don't care how bad it is, I'll take it on..."

Murmuring feverishly to himself, he took out the cleaning rag and the Takasu stick (In a slight fit of madness, it was a tool Ryūji had put together himself from wooden chopsticks and cotton fabric fashioned after that famous cleaning product, the 'Matsui stick') from his bag.

Now that he was ready, he turned around as if saying, "Okay Kawashima, please unlock the door and let me in", but,

"No no, Ami, with this beautiful beach in front of us, you can't mention something like cleaning~!"

Eh? Those unbelievable words, they had come from his dear Minori's lips. She nimbly jumped over the deck's wooden railing and landed on the beach,

"Wahoo! The sea, the sea! It's the sea~~!"

Flinging her shoes and socks aside, she ran towards the edge of the water. She disregarded the coming waves and went in ankle-deep,

"Hya, it's cold~! Ahaha, come on waves! I won't lose~!"

Amidst the splashing water that shimmered under the midsummer sun, she gave the incoming waves a low kick. All smiles, she then turned around and waved, yelling "Hey everyone~! Hurry up and come on over~!". Seeing Minori like that, Ami kicked off her own sandals and rolled up her jeans,

"I bet that feels good~! I'm going too~!"

"We'll take care of cleaning later!"

Even Kitamura went barefoot and took off running. " Kyah~!", "So cold!", they were all happily shouting,

"Hey, come on guys! We should clean first, shouldn't we?!"

Ryūji's dissenting cry was dispersed by the salty air in an instant. Thinking "What the heck", he turned around to see that one other person was still on the deck, the failure of a swimmer who didn't seem to have any interest in the sea. Indeed, she was still there.

"Hey, Taiga! So I see you're still here! You feel the same way, don't you, like you'd rather clean first instead of playing in the ocean, right?! That's right, the two of us can work on our plan some more now while we're cleaning."

However, just as he took one step forward towards her , she avoided him as if he were a leper,

"Noo~, don't get near me!... You, just now, you were making a perverted face."

"Eh...?"

"Disgusting."

Her narrowed eyes filling with contempt, Taiga coldly and disdainfully turned her face away, completely ignoring him. Kicking off her sandals, she ended up running off to join the others at the edge of the sea.

"Oh, there she is! Taiga, come over here! There's a ton of fish~!"

"Eh, where? I want to see!... Ooh, it's cold!"

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it soon!"

Taiga, who was lifting the edge of her skirt and exposing the lower half of her snow white legs as she entered the water's edge, held onto Minori's arm. The one left behind, Ryūji, was totally alone. *Everybody's laughing happily... That looks like fun...*

Although he was still unable to completely toss aside his urge to clean, there was no point in staying behind by himself like this. Not wanting to ruin the pleasant atmosphere, Ryūji hesitantly made his way down from the wooden deck while constantly turning back to look at the villa. He went as far as the edge of the tumultuous sea, and fidgeting on his feet, he idly wondered if he should remove his shoes when,

"Take that!"

"Wah!"

He was splashed in the face with cold water. He could taste the salt on his lips and his nose and eyes burned. Meanwhile, Ami was laughing.

"C'mon c'mon, Takasu-kun, let's play together!"

"Play, you say... Gah, hey you!"

"Ufufu, hurry, hurry~!"

Despite the fact that she was inviting him, she mercilessly splashed water with her fair white hands at Ryūji who was still fully clothed. Although her smile was gentle like an angel's and her beckoning voice was like a passing breeze,

"C'mon c'mon c'mon~!"

Aiming her splashes precisely at his face, she showed her fickle nature with her undoubtedly malicious intent.

"Dammit... You wanna go?!"

"Kyah~!"

In this situation, there was no need to hold back. He was intent on mercilessly paying her back double, but when he tried Ami laughingly retreated towards the open sea. The ocean spray that glittered in the midsummer sun had drenched the edge of Ryūji's shorts before he knew it and the intense sun began to tan his skin.

"Ooh~, cold! It's cold~!"

Laughing and fleeing, Ami had her jeans rolled up far enough that her knees were exposed, and not taking her personality into account, the whole scene looked just like a soda or sports drink commercial. Splashing water at each other, laughing together, he started feeling like it was really summer. Even his urge to clean had faded. The surging cumulonimbus clouds within the blue sky also added to the overall summer feel.

By the time he realized it, he was laughing loudly while intently chasing after Ami, his sweat and the seawater now indistinguishable on his skin...

"It's really cold~! Geez, Takasu-kun is a bully~!"

However,

"Oh really, so it's cold? Cold like this?"

"Ah~! Stop it~! Ya...Ah?!"

"Cold like these sea lice?"

"K...Kyaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!"

Behind Ryūji, Taiga had come in and replaced him as Ami's opponent without him noticing. The things that Taiga continued to fling at Ami were the sea lice that could be found in abundance on the nearby rocks. All of a sudden, Ami's white tanktop was littered with clinging sea lice,

"You damned midget, what do you think you're doing ?!"

Looking like Prajnaparamita as she scowled angrily, Ami started hurling the sea lice she had suddenly acquired right back at Taiga.

"Shut up and take these sea lice, you stupid Chihuahua !"

"You're the one befitting of sea lice, you midget!"

Putting a damper on the otherwise pleasant midsummer seaside scene, an extremely nasty fight had broken out. While Ryūji cringed fearfully and prepared to run away, the one who had the courage to intervene was,

"Look here you two! This is our long-awaited trip, so what's with the fighting!"

...none other than Yūsaku Kitamura, the righteous class representative. However, the sea lice that the two girls were wildly flinging at one another started to hit and cling to Kitamura's shirt as he now stood in between them, right in the line of fire,

"Uwah, hey wait, these... You guys shouldn't be touching these, should you?! I don't really... I, I can't do it , please get them off for me... Ami! Get them off, please!"

"No way~! Yūsaku's disgusting! Don't get near me!"

"What?! Then Aisaka, please take them off for me!"

"U...I, I'm sorry..."

"What the heck?! You won't remove them for me?! But you guys were handling them with your bare hands just a second ago!"

What he said might be true, but it seemed that being chased by a guy with sea lice all over him was undoubtedly disgusting. Ryūji felt somewhat sorry, but even looking Kitamura in the face was too much for him, namely because they were even hanging from his glasses. ..

So with the two girls screaming "Kyah!" while being closely pursued by the glasses-wearing guy covered in sea lice, they all ran together along the water's edge. It seemed like they had found an agreeable rhythm for the moment.

Then,

"Ahaha, those guys are so ridiculous~! They really gathered a lot of sea lice!"

"Y, yeah."

Catching him by surprise, Ryūji was suddenly looking at Minori's brightly smiling face. Minori was watching the three dash around wildly and smiling,

"Well, actually, I can catch sea cucumbers..."

"Whoa?!"

She held out her hands, showing Ryūji a sea cucumber she had caught. He instinctively recoiled, but,

"Y'see, waters that have sea cucumbers in them are pretty clean. The sea cucumbers clean the water, and they're rather tasty, y'know."

Minori was in a good mood, simply ecstatic to say the least. After nonsensically bringing her arms together in a crossbones sign, she tossed the sea cucumber back into the water,

"Ahaha~, my hands reek of the sea now~!"

Sniffing her hands, Minori started smiling even more. Faced with the overabundant cheeriness of her carefree disposition, Ryūji naturally ended up smiling as well, but ,

"...Hey, Kushieda, by the way,"

"Hmm?"

He couldn't lose sight of the goal of this trip. He needed to take this chance and do what he could to advance the plan somewhat, basically that was what he was thinking.

"That thing drifting about over there, don't you think it kind of looks like a human head?"

"~...!"

What he was pointing at was actually just seaweed floating on the surface of the water. But depending on how you looked at it, it just might have looked like a floating human head. In any case, he got the feeling that since it was Minori, she'd eventually let her own imagination run wild and do the job of scaring herself for him. Just as he expected, Minori was starting to get goosebumps all over her body,

"Guh...Kyah~! A corpse... It's a corpse! Or more importantly, this water is, with that rotting corpse's... Uwah~!"

Somersaulting as she tried to run away, her balance was shot as she clung to Ryūji arm. She leaned her

weight against him. With the sensation of her fingers as well as the palm of her hand that was hotter than he had expected,

"Are... are you okay?!"

He felt like he could just die. Starting from the back of his neck, a tingling sensation ran down his spine. It felt kind of... No, it felt really really good.

"How could I be okay?! We're standing in corpse water ~~!

However, next to the excited Ryūji, Minori's face was completely red, seeming genuinely scared. And she had been smiling so cheerfully just moments before too. Naturally, he felt rather guilty for selfishly getting excited on his own,

"S,...sorry for saying something weird... That thing, it's just seaweed."

Without thinking, Ryūji had given in, but,

"Kyah! So it's a seaweed corpse~~!"

From her half-standing position, Minori somersaulted once again, rolling along the wet beach. "According to her logic, wouldn't that mean that the meat, fish and so on from the supermarket would also be considered corpses?" ...was what he was thinking, but before he even had the chance to console her, Minori was already running all out towards the wood deck. He could see Ami in partial shock as she watched from a bit off to the side.

Although the plan was still in the preliminary stages, Minori was already thoroughly ensnared in the trap.

Chapter 3

"Hey Takasu, Ami's got a motorcycle and she told me to go shopping. While the girls are cleaning up, if you sit on the back, then we..."

"...Hm?"

Watching Ryūji as he looked up, Kitamura's handsome glasses-clad face stiffened momentarily.

In Ryūji's right hand was the 'Takasu stick'. In his left was a spray bottle of cleaner. At his waist was a dry rag, and beside him, he had a bucket and a wet rag. Ryūji was wearing rubber gloves and on all fours while in the middle of intensely polishing the bottom of the System Kitchen's foreign-made sink in perfect form, as if he were at home.

Getting off his hands so he could reply to Kitamura properly, he removed his gloves,

"What was that? What did you say just now?"

"Ah, no... never mind. So you're still... You're really into this cleaning, aren't ya?"

"Ah, well, it's something worth doing."

Sighing, Ryūji knelt on the floor Japanese-style as he took another glance around the area. His bloodshot eyes glinting dangerously, and ferociously licked his lips, but that was only because his lips were dry.

The villa was even more wonderful than he had originally imagined. It was a two-story building. On the first floor, there was a living room that was easily over twenty tatami mats in size and had a fireplace. Next to that was the dining room from which there was a clear view of the beach, and even the kitchen that was separated by a counter looked larger than six tatami mats and had a table. He had also heard that the second floor had five bedrooms. Furthermore, there were full bathrooms here and there on both floors.

"That Ami, she told us the place was a 5LDK, but... this is ridiculous; the living room alone is probably bigger than my house."

"Ami's house when she was living in my neighborhood was even bigger than this place and I bet

her apartment in the city is even more so... I can't even wrap my mind around it. How should I put it... I guess you could say she's an elite."

"An elite, huh..."

Bringing their hands to their faces like old ladies, the two guys somehow ended up gazing towards the high ceiling. Like in the houses that appeared on foreign dramas, a fan was spinning round and round above their heads. It really felt like they were in another world... Neither Ryūji nor Kitamura could figure out what purpose the fan served. They were unconsciously sighing and acting rather absentminded when,

"Okay Yūsaku, here's the key. So? Is Takasu-kun going shopping with you?"

The elite had suddenly popped her head in through the doorway. Wondering *What's this about shopping?*, only Ryūji was confused by the question.

"Ah no, it looks like Takasu's in the middle of a cleaning fit, so I'm going by myself."

"Ehh? That won't work. There's no basket attached and it's not a scooter so you can't put stuff at your feet. Are

you planning on tying it all down with cord? Because we don't even have any, so unless there's someone to carry the stuff, I'm telling you it's impossible."

"Well then, will you go?"

"If I'm not here, then there won't be anyone left who's familiar with this villa, right?"

Ohh, now I see... Finally catching up with the situation, Ryūji raised his hand to offer his suggestion.

"Take Taiga. That girl can't clean anyway, so even if she stayed behind, she wouldn't be any help. He~y, Taiga~!"

"What, what's with the shouting?!"

"Whoa!"

He was surprised. Taiga had been surprisingly close by.

She might have been cleaning the floor, or maybe she had just been sitting there, or perhaps she had sensed Kitamura's presence and was stealthily making her way closer. Whatever the reason, she was on all fours, looking

out with her head protruding from between Ami's long legs.

"What the heck you?! Don't poke your head in weird places!"

Disregarding Ami's yelling and acting like a regular customer poking her face into a shop to ask, "You still open?", Taiga held onto the back of Ami's knees and stared only at Ryūji, making sure not to look towards Kitamura.

"Hey, we need someone to go shopping with Kitamura , so I was thinking you could go."

Following up Ryūji's suggestion, Kitamura held the keys he had gotten from Ami near his face and jingled them.

"How about it, won't you go with me? You know that mountain we walked down earlier, I bet it'll feel pretty nice to ride up it on a motorcycle."

"...~!"

Suddenly stiffening up, Taiga pursed her lips into a small triangle. Her round face tinged pink and her eyes

narrowed, turning in on themselves. It was the expression Taiga would show when she was nervous or afraid. *That's right, that's right,* Ryūji nodded to himself. Riding along with Kitamura on a seaside tour... She probably hadn't even imagined of a situation like that, even in her dreams. What a nice assist. By happenstance, he had ended up helping Taiga after all. But oh well, since it just turned out like this coincidentally, there was no...

"I, I won't go."

"What?!"

Ryūji, who had been inebriated by his own goodwill, unthinkingly turned around looking like a demon. It wasn't that he was mad, but rather, he was just surprised. A good assist, a good chance, why hadn't she taken advantage of it?

Unaware of what Ryūji was thinking, Taiga pressed her face against the back of Ami's knees and nervously hid her face like the elder daughter of a poor family watching her younger brother who was aiming to join the Giants and her slightly paranoid father from behind a tree,

(!)

"I'm scared of motorcycles, so...I won't go."

"...Hey what are you..."

Perhaps unconsciously, she had been rubbing Ami's behind. Running away from Ami who had shifted herself in annoyance, she now stood near the wall, fidgeting,

"I bet Minorin will go, so I'll go get her."

Calling out "Mi~no~ri~n~", she ended up escaping down the hall.

Not only did she just discard her own opportunity, did she now plan on doing the same with his chance to talk with Minori? *What is she doing?* Ryūji thought, and quickly got to his feet and chased after Taiga. Catching her by the elbow and pulling her back,

"Wait a second you! What the heck are you thinking?!"

He made sure to speak quietly enough that Kitamura and Ami wouldn't be able to hear them from the kitchen as he started questioning her, but,

"...Shut up."

"Guh!"

She elbowed Ryūji sharply in the gut, making him unable to speak as he fell to his knees. Taiga looked down on him with an extremely icy glare, like a frozen corpse of a saber-toothed tiger found in the deepest reaches of the ice after thousands of years,

"I've got an idea. Unlike you, I work in an organized and logical manner."

"...Even though you were just too shy. I saw the whole. ..Oo!"

"...A mosquito. There was a mosquito, y'know."

After taking that slap to the mouth, he couldn't ask any more questions.

"Shopping? I'll go, I'll go!"...After volunteering, Minori carelessly tossed her mop aside and hopped on the motorcycle, and departed for the station-front supermarket together with Kitamura. She was yelling out something like, "Let's fly like the wind!" as they drove off .

Near the entryway on the wooden deck where they had just seen the two off, Taiga said in a low voice,

"Got it? From now until the time Minorin gets back, we're going to look for a place where we can pull off our prearranged plan. Like for example, in the attic or climbing up to the window of Minorin's room from outside. Search out all the places in this villa that can be used to hide, places to surprise Minorin. Since you're a dog, it should be easy for you."

Pretending he didn't hear the extraneous bad-mouthing, Ryūji nodded.

"...Okay, I got it. But, it'll be troublesome if we're seen by Ami. Now that I think about it, just where did she go? "

When he realized Ami wasn't there anymore, he looked around but saw no sign of her. Taiga just " Hmphed" and shrugged,

"Dunno. Anyway, if she catches us, then we'll just have to make sure she doesn't figure out what we're doing."

She prodded Ryūji from behind as if to tell him to hurry up. Considering that she had declared herself " organized and logical", what she had said just now was rather haphazard, but it wasn't like there was really any other way to do it. With her pushing him along, they went back inside,

"You, go check out the second floor. Starting with the room closest to the stairs, it goes Kitamura's, yours, mine, Minorin's, and then the stupid Chihuahua's. Earlier, that idiot said she was changing the sheets or something."

"Got it. So you've got the first floor. There are cockroaches, so be careful."

"Eh...?"

Leaving behind Taiga, who was making a complicated expression, Ryūji ascended the stairs to the second floor. *It'll be fine if it's Taiga, since it's not like she'd lose to roaches.*

Walking carelessly along the broad wooden floor, he was astounded by the wide hallway and the doors to the bedrooms that lined the south side. He got the feeling that they had been much more carefully constructed than those of some pitiful pension or petit hotel.

What with Taiga's place and Ami's house, there seemed to be an awful lot of rich people in the world... While thinking about his own relatively snug house, Ryūji stepped lightly and peeked into Minori's room. He was supposed to sneak inside and check whether or not it would be possible to rap on the window from the outside. If time permitted, they even planned on climbing into the attic.

Basically, Taiga and Ryūji were going to give Minori quite a fright. Of course he thought it was pathetic, but if they didn't make sure to scare her today and tomorrow, then the knight making his appearance the following evening wouldn't be very effective at all. And then, they'd be stuck with no way to escape that future with all

the prostrating and puppies. It really was incredibly egotistical, but when it comes to unrequited love, people are nothing if not egotistical. In the first place, they would come up with all sorts of fantasies on their own as well as convenient misunderstandings... Well, even if he tried to defend his actions, his feelings of guilt weren't going to just conveniently go away.

He was aware that entering her room like this was kind of stalker-like. But, he was pretty sure she hadn't unpacked yet and he wasn't going to be touching her stuff, so it wouldn't really be a big deal... Debating with himself, he made his way down the hall when,

"...Huh? What's this here?"

Opposite all the bedroom doors on the south side stood two unidentified doors along the stairs. Ryūji tried opening one of them carefully, but then he just shrugged his shoulders. He hadn't checked before, but it was just a bathroom. *I'll come back to clean you later, so be prepared*, pointing at the toilet, Ryūji thus delayed its sentence.

So that must mean this is the shower, opening the door, he decided to take a peek.

"Hm?...Geez, what the heck?"

He hadn't turned on the light, but the changing area plus washing machine room was brightly lit. It wasn't like Ryūji would be responsible for the utilities cost, but he wasn't the kind of guy who would allow such frivolous waste. However, although he wanted to turn off the light, he had no idea where the switch was. It was probably somewhere beyond the partially opened sliding glass door. He stepped inside and looked around. He saw a sink and a bathtub that was surrounded by a shower curtain. There was a switch on the wall next to the glass door.

Huh? he thought for a moment. It seemed kind of damp for some reason... *But that can't be*, rationalizing away his feeling of unease, and went ahead and flipped off the light switch.

"Kyah?!"

"Oh sorry!... Huh?"

A girl had screamed. Reflexively switching the light back on, Ryūji tilted his head. Just who...

"Oh geez, so it's you, Takasu-kun? Would you mind not entering the girls' bath?"

...On the other side of the shower curtain.

...The sound of the faucet being turned, the sound of the dripping shower.

...The hanging moisture.

...That voice, it belonged to Ami.

Ah.

"A, s, s, s, sorry~! I didn't notice... Ah~!"

"...Hm, fufu...

"

From the other side of the closed shower curtain, a white arm suddenly extended outwards. Desperately turning away, he tried to escape, but that wet hand somehow retained a tight grip on Ryūji's arm. Pulled with unbelievable force, Ryūji futilely struggled by grabbing at the tiles in an attempt to get away.

"Wha, wha, what the heck are you doing...~?!"

"He~ey,"

Ami's voice was just like a kitten's as it shrilly saturated the shower room.

"Takasu-kun, you're quite bold, aren't you? I had no idea... So you came, to fulfill your desire?"

"It's not like that! I didn't come here on purpose! I just didn't notice!"

"Come now... There's no need for excuses, is there? No one's around to see... It's just the two of us, all alone..."

"Are you stupid?!"

From within the curtained shower, there came a stifled laughter. Ami was just like a demon. With Ryūji firmly ensnared in her trap, her murmuring voice continued to echo as if it were a paralysis incantation.

"Aren't you glad...? I'll keep this a secret from everybody... From Yūsaku and the jealous tiger.... Even Minori-chan, it'll be a secret..."

"Fwah!"

The curtain swayed. Through the thin fabric, he could see her silhouette slowly stand up. *Wait a second, please wait*, Ryūji was practically on the verge of death as he desperately covered his eyes with one arm in wild confusion.

"W, w, what are you thinking, you?!"

"It's fine... If it's what Takasu-kun wants..."

"I don't want it, I don't!"

"Really?... Hey, are you serious?... You really, don't want it...?"

"Want what?!"

"...This!"

"Kyaaaa~h~!"

"...Ah?"

Ryūji had desperately averted his gaze from the suddenly flung open curtain, turning his whole face away as he had voicelessly screamed and fell on his backside, and looking down on him,

"...Pufu~!"

Puffing up her cheeks, the demon started laughing hysterically. So then,

"Kyahahahahahahahahaha~!"

Laughing boisterously at the idiot who was stuck on the ground sitting with his legs outstretched, she sounded like a machine gun as she mercilessly pelted him with ridicule.

"...Wh, w...huh?"

Standing in the bathtub that was coated in bubbles, Ami's body contorted as she cackled evilly. Dancing joyfully and gleefully with tears forming in her eyes, she pointed at the pitiful-looking Ryūji and writhed in laughter,

"Oh~ man~! Ta~ ka~ su~ ku~ n?! I wonder, just what were you expecting?! Look at your face... Kyahahaha! Hee, how funny~! It's too much~! Ahahahaha!"

Wearing a t-shirt and jeans and holding a sponge in one hand, Ami seemed to be enjoying herself as she pounded the wall repeatedly.

"You...J, just what were you doing...?"

"Clean, ing, the, tub

. Since Ryūji loves cleaning so much, I suppose I could let you take my place if you want~

"

"Ah, Ryūji! How was the second floor? I found the ladder that leads to the attic... What is it?"

Practically catatonic with shock, mortification, and embarrassment, he had fled down the stairs, and after running into Taiga on the stair landing, he started trying to communicate by frantically gesturing with his whole body to tell her about what Ami had perpetrated against him. With his wild sanpaku eyes rather teary and bloodshot, he was relatively certain that if he had approached anyone other than Taiga, he would have been arrested, indicted, convicted, and then put to work.

"Ehh? Fufu...that stupid Chihuahua did? Just like that? She acted like she was showering? You...were teased? Ryūji was? So she pretended to be naked and tried seducing you?"

How he managed to get his point across so well was a mystery even to himself, but while pinching his earlobe, Ryūji firmly nodded to tell her she was spot on.

"...Anyway, how did the rest of the plan go? Did you make sure to check out Minorin's room properly?"

He thoroughly shook his head side to side.

"So useless!"

At Taiga's instantaneous and extreme beratement, the ever-delicate Ryūji retreated sadly against the wall, subconsciously bringing his hand to the cell phone in his back pocket... If he called home now, maybe Yasuko would pick up and let him talk with Inko-chan...

"Don't go looking for comfort! What a seriously useless guy, how could you let yourself be made fun of by that

stupid Chihuahua?! Geez, fine, I get it. I'll go check the room out for myself, and while I'm at it, I'll have a word with that dumb girl."

He didn't know whether or not just a word would be sufficient, but right now, Ryūji felt like leaving everything to Taiga. *Yeah, you tell her, whether it's one word or a thousand, a complaint or a curse, please tell that demon off* . Pathetic? He didn't care. Ryūji's pride and chivalry had already been cruelly decimated.

Ascending the stairs with a decidedly sharp expression on her face, Taiga shouted, "Hey! Bakachi~!" quite loudly . To Ryūji who was waiting on the ground floor, it sounded very promising.

Next, he heard the sound of the sliding door being opened, followed by a shriek, then there seemed to be some sort of scuffle, and finally...silence.

For a while, that unpleasant silence lingered on, and wondering if something might have happened, Ryūji started to get worried when,

"...I, I can't believe you, geez, what the heck were you thinking, seriously..."

Complaining profusely as she descended the stairs, Ami appeared. Looking sweatier than before and perhaps irritated, she practically shoved Ryūji aside from his place at the bottom of the stairs, a sweet scent wafting from her wet hair at the same time.

...Wet hair?

And then there was Taiga who had come down afterwards,

"W, what happened?!"

For some reason her whole body was lightly shaking, and on top of that, there on her face she had a red mark that was distinctively hand-shaped. Like a cat that had been run over by a car, her expression remained frozen and totally wide-eyed, and then,

"...The stupid Chihuahua, was really taking a bath..."

She said.

"You don't need to say any more than that!"

As Ami turned around snappingly, Ryūji wondered what had happened between the two of them, but it was

too difficult for him to ask. There was only one thing he was sure of - Taiga was now cross-eyed.

"Ta, Taiga...? Pull yourself together, just what did you end up seeing?"

"Ryūji, you know...about Bakachi, it's like poof!"

Poofing open her right hand near her right breast,

"Like, poof!"

And poofing open her left hand near her left breast, Taiga then finally brought her hands down to the lower half of her body, balling them up and then exaggeratedly flinging them both open again.

"...~Poof~!... You know."

Ami jumped, practically flying through the air towards them,

"I said stop that already!"

She landed a chop to Taiga's head. Of course, under normal circumstances this wasn't something the Palmtop Tiger would just let slide, but Taiga was rather out of it,

tottering over to the phone stand and picking up a pad of paper and a pencil,

"Ryūji, you know...about Bakachi, right here it's like this... And surprisingly, this is like that... Here it's like, poof~!"

"Don't go around drawing other people's naked bodies !"

The picture, which was oddly realistic because of, rather than in spite of the fact it sucked so bad, was taken away and ripped apart.

After that, it was a good thirty minutes or so before Taiga turned back to normal.

* * *

It was probably about an hour later. Shortly after he heard the sound of a motorcycle braking outside,

"We're back~! He~y, Takasu-ku~n!"

Ryūji looked up from polishing the silverware like a faithful dog. Just now, Minori had definitely called out to him.

When he ran down the long hallway in slippers and got to the entranceway through which she had called,

"Sorry sorry, but could you help me carry this stuff?"

"Woah, you guys really bought a lot, didn't you?!"

"I guess so, but we need enough for the five of us for dinner tonight, three meals tomorrow, and maybe even breakfast the day after tomorrow. And then there's Oolong tea and seasoning and other things."

"We can't leave any stuff behind though."

"It'll be fine as long as we eat everything. Ooh."

What Minori was dragging along the wood deck towards the entranceway were four large shopping bags full of food. Hearing the clink of something fragile hitting the ground, Ryūji rushed to take the bags off Minori's hands.

"Don't drag them. Geez, what the heck is Kitamura doing?"

"He's putting away the bike. Sorry, I'll carry this one. So what are Taiga and Amin up to?"

"Kawashima was watching television, but she went ballistic over how bad the reception was, so now she's on the phone with her parents. Taiga is...possibly in the bathroom. Anyway, let's take all this to the kitchen."

With Minori nodding in agreement, he was partly happy and partly embarrassed, since it felt like they were newlyweds. *Dehehe*... To hide his slackening face, Ryūji walked ahead as he carried the heavy baggage to the kitchen. However, he couldn't just let himself idly succumb to transient pleasure. It was okay though, because he definitely hadn't forgotten his primary goal.

Of course, everything was already prepared. After all, it wasn't like all Taiga did was peep into Ami's bathroom . Confirming the minor creaking coming from above, Ryūji calmly estimated the distance... *About there maybe?*

"Ah, please put the food and stuff right there for now, would you? We have to separate the refrigerated items from the non-refrigerated ones."

"O~kay~."

He nonchalantly brought Minori to a halt before the kitchen entrance. Squatting in the hallway, Minori began rummaging through the bag.

"Let's see... Sauce is kept at room temperature, right? This curry roux...room temperature, probably. What about you, onion, which are you?"

Kneeling opposite her, Ryūji pretended to be digging around in another bag as he stared at Minori's remarkedly smooth down-turned face, noticing that the area where her shiny hair parted was somewhat reddened from being in the sun and her upper lip was thin and somewhat pouty. *Seriously, so cute... No, wait. No, this isn't the time for that*.

His throat had become dry due to nervousness, so he casually cleared it,

"Ku, Kushieda. Does this go in the fridge? I wonder, maybe it's written on here somewhere?"

"Hm? Let me see it. Umm..."

He handed the can of tomato puree (which obviously didn't need to go in the fridge) to Minori and got her to read the small print. As she read the words, her large shining eyes narrowed, and then,

"...Eek?!"

She gave a sudden convulsive shriek.

"Hm? What's the matter?"

Looking up, Ryūji tried acting surprised, but he sounded rather nonchalant as he asked her.

"N, n, nonono, nn...."

As if she had turned into Junji Inagawa, Minori's eyes were wide open, her face was stiff, and she kept turning

about frantically, switching back and forth between looking at Ryūji's face and looking over her shoulder.

"N, nonono, ju...just now, something, behind me... It, it was, uwah... What is it?!"

She kept glancing about like she was searching for something, and forcefully pushing aside her bangs as if she wanted to say she couldn't believe her eyes, she looked at Ryūji's face one more time.

"Maybe it was your imagination, there's nothing there, you know?"

"..."

"Is something wrong?"

"...No... It's...nothing... I, think. Must have been...my mistake. That's right... Yeah, that~ must~ be~ it~..."

Singsongily trying to convince herself even while her face remained stiff, she went and smacked herself a bit before she lowered her gaze back down towards the can.

Behind her.

Once more. Just like before, the same thing was happening again. Of course Ryūji saw what was going on.

A panel in the ceiling had been pushed aside, and hanging from the darkness on the other side of the gap, fresh seaweed that they'd collected just moments ago from the beach descended towards the back of Minori's neck. The round, puffed up cluster of seaweed was on its way towards the back neckline of the defenseless Minori's hoodie. Finally, a limp end touched her skin. Naturally, the whole rig was "Powered by Taiga@the attic." By the way, about the "poofy" ball of seaweed, " This is the floating imitation ghost, Bakachi No. 1"...or so Taiga had told him. It wasn't like he didn't think about putting a stop to the whole thing.

"...~..."

Minori's face froze in a grimace. Very, very slowly, she turned around. Of course, Bakachi No. 1 was safely recalled right away, leaving absolutely no trace behind.

"What's the matter, Kushieda?"

I'm sorry... Even as he thought that, Ryūji faced her straight on with a questioning expression. Minori rather

confusedly pointed in the wrong direction, her eyes showing her utter bewilderment,

"J, just now, I'm sure, definitely, something touched me... It was like, slippery, or rather, slimy... It was just like...seaweed? Kind of..."

Well, that's because it really is seaweed...

"...A corpse's hair that's like seaweed... It's like the story about the ghost who got wrapped up in seaweed and died... Was it a sea otter? Wrapped up in seaweed, it must be a sea otter, right? The corpse of a sea otter?... A sea otter whose pouch is jammed full of dead scallops?!"

There it is, Ryūji sighed. As expected of Minori, she had a limitless knack for taking something weird and blowing it insanely out of proportion. Before long, she was stiffly clenching her front teeth and trembling fearfully,

"I, it's wet...the spot where I was touched is wet! This smell is..."

Sniff, after touching the residue left behind on her neck by the seaweed, Minori sniffed her hand,

"Gyah~! I knew it, it smells like seaweeeeeed~!"

Total bullseye, in fact.

"H, hey!"

"It's the sea otter's corpse~! It's the stench of seaweeeeeed~~!"

Extending her arm as far out as possible like she had touched something nasty, Minori ended up running down the hall as if her life depended on it. For her to become that scared from something so trivial... Ryūji almost felt like giving thanks to the heavens for such a blessing as he calmly watched her run off.

Then a bit later,

"...I kind of, feel guilty..."

Minori's footsteps had receded. Pushing the ceiling panel far aside, the one who peered out with her fair face was, of course, Taiga. The dust was making her nose run as she looked down at Ryūji,

"You're going to go to hell for doing this, you know."

Her words were like something an astrologist might say.

"...But what about you, you're the actual perpetrator."

"You're the primary offender though. Anyway, let's get rid of Bakachi No. 1. Do you think I can jump down from here?"

"Such a reckless... Don't even think about it, it's too dangerous."

Saying "Don't worry, don't worry" as she pushed the panel aside even more, Taiga's face receded into the darkness, replaced soon after by her toes.

"Using the ladder again to get down would be too troublesome."

"Hey, wait a...Are you serious? Don't fall, okay?"

"Yeah right, I'm not that much of a klutz."

She was going to fall. Judging by her pattern of falling, it was almost a certainty.

Fully believing that, Ryūji positioned himself directly below her as she prepared to drop down and held out his arms, ready and waiting to catch her if necessary. Swinging her bare feet as she looked down to estimate the distance to the floor, Taiga finally started to slowly slide the bottom half of her body through the opening in the ceiling when,

"Ugh~..."

What did she say just now?... Before he even had a chance to ask, Taiga suddenly slipped, dropping a few dozen centimeters. Catching her by her bare feet in the nick of time, Ryūji had kept her from falling all the way to the floor.

"U, u, ooh... This is probably...bad... My hands are slipping!"

Taiga was precariously hanging on by the pits of her arms with no other support. As Taiga flailed her legs futilely, her voice was tinged with worry.

"Ah, up, down, I probably can't make it either way..."

"Now look, I told you, didn't I?! I'll hold onto you, so just go ahead and let go!"

"N, no way!"

"Why not?!"

"I bet you you're looking at my panties, you perverted dog! Trying to look at underwear even at a time like this, you're unbelievable!"

"You're the one who's unbelievable! I didn't have even the 'P' from panties in mind!"

Although Ryūji finally got a hold of her, Taiga was trying to kick him with her legs, smacking him in the face with her bare feet, and just when he was considering yanking her down,

"Ooh! The seaweed ghost really did appear~~!"

"Seaweed spirit~? What's that?"

"It might have been Tetsuo Ishidate's spirit~~!"

"Eh~? Who's that~? One of Minori-chan's relatives?"

"Or else it might have been a sea otter ghost~~!"

"Sea otter gift~? That sounds rather cute, doesn't it~?"

Ryūji's face suddenly went pale. It wasn't that his extremely steepened sanpaku eyes were looking at the two incoming girls with thoughts of turning them into seaweed wraps or anything like that; rather, he looked the way he did because he was in such a frantic state that he could feel his heart wanting to leap out of his chest.

"Uwah, oh nononononono...!"

The two approaching were obviously Minori and Ami. Taiga, who probably heard them talking, started flailing her legs even more violently. She was desperately trying to make her way back up into the ceiling. Even while her flurry of stomps struck at his face, Ryūji supported Taiga's bare feet with both hands, desperately trying with all his might to push her back up to the attic. However,

"Hurry u...Dah~!"

In her frantic confusion, Taiga dropped her flashlight, which ended up hitting Ryūji clean in the nose. Just as he

collapsed in pain, Taiga managed to pull herself up into the attic and quickly put the ceiling panel back into place.

"Eh~, so where's this spirit of Tetsu, hm? All I see is Takasu-kun sitting here... Actually, Takasu-kun, what are you doing...?"

"Huh~, how weird~... Takasu-kun, what's wrong?"

"Um, it's not really..."

The moment he turned around to tell them it was nothing,

"Gehhhhh~~?!"

Seemingly inhuman screams of terror echoed forth from both Minori and Ami simultaneously. Wondering what in the world they were going on about, Ryūji unconcernedly brought his hand up to his still-hurting nose,

"...Oh!"

He was shocked too when he felt a warm viscous fluid. Looking at his hand, he saw that it was stickily covered in deep red, the result of his heavy nosebleed. Maybe this

was divine punishment for earlier... Although for the sake of correctness, what had handed out the punishment was Taiga's flashlight. Unable to give any sort of explanation, he rushed wordlessly to the kitchen and washed his hands and face,

"What happened to Takasu-kun all of a sudden?! Was it the work of the seaweed ghost?!"

As Minori asked while worriedly giving Ryūji a playful chop to the back of his neck, he couldn't even reply. Frantically bringing the bleed to a trickle, he held his nose and turned his face upwards. Ami was peering at Ryūji's face while looking amazed,

"Anyway, here's a tissue! You know, I wonder, how in the world could this have happened?! Ah, could it possibly be, maybe you were overstimulated by what happened earlier 'that time'?"

Seriously pretending that he hadn't heard Ami murmur an inappropriate "Fufu"

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"No, that's not it. I just picked my nose too much."

"What are you, an elementary school kid or something!
"

Seeming as if she'd suffered a blow to her pride, Ami executed a flawless tsukkomi, which then caused Ryūji to feel rather embarrassed. So then, curling up tightly so that Minori couldn't see, he gently pressed the tissue to his nose while thinking, *Ah, I hate myself... I’m the worst... the worst...*

"Hey, what's going on, why's everyone together?"

Kitamura asked in a clear voice.

"Ah~, the seaweed made Takasu-kun's nose ble...Oh my gosh, what happened to you~~?!"

At Minori's sudden surprised shout, Ami and Ryūji both turned around and looked at Kitamura. The sight left them at a loss for words.

"Ahaha~!"

"Hey, this isn't a situation where you should be laughing, is it?!"

"Well, I was just about done putting the bike away in the shed, which was rather cramped, when I tried to push aside some of the heavy machinery...and I kind of got myself pinned."

Laughing and dripping black oil from all over his body, Kitamura's glasses had become sunglasses, and there were splotches of blood oozing out from slight cuts in various places including his face and elbows. His appearance utterly trumped the impact of Ryūji's nosebleed.

"Ah, I can't believe it! Are you okay, Yūsaku?!"

Taking back the tissues from Ryūji's hands, Ami went over to the much worse-off-looking Kitamura. After that,

"...What's with the commotion? What in the world happened?"

The last one to show up was Taiga. Glancing at Kitamura who looked like an oil-soaked bird and Ryūji with his doubly plugged nostrils, Taiga furrowed her brow,

"~Achoo!"

And let loose an extraordinary sneeze. However.

"Ah~... Oh nononono... Did something happen to Taiga too?!"

"Ehh? Ah, nah, just...Kachoo~! I was cleaning...Bachoo! And, there was so much dust, so my nose is a bit...Choo~!...Uwah~...Cchoo~!...Haa..."

While sniffling pitifully, Taiga rubbed at her reddened eyes. All over her hair, her clothes, her hands, and even her legs, Taiga's whole body was thickly covered in dustballs. Probably because she didn't have her flashlight , she must have been forced to crawl around blindly in the attic. Sending dust flying through the air every time she moved even a little bit, she kept making a scene like a page from a girls' comic every time she sneezed, except instead of flowers she was surrounded by dust balls.

"...You guys are weird! Every one of you, you're a~ll weird!"

Ami very clearly declared, taking the tissue box from Kitamura to Taiga whose nose was dripping. *Don't worry , you're plenty weird yourself*, he might have been thinking, but there was no way he could say that with things as they were.

* * *

With all the commotion—like playing in the sea as soon as they arrived, performing major cleanup, going shopping, making Bakachi No. 1, or being attacked by Bakachi No. 1—they'd all gotten caught up in the moment, and so none of them had eaten anything for lunch by the time 4pm rolled around.

"...What a beautiful sunset..."

Standing by himself in the kitchen that he had personally scrubbed sparkling clean, Ryūji pointedly stared outside the window as if trying to escape from the reality in front of him. By the way, his nosebleed had stopped completely, he had changed out of his t-shirt that had reeked of the beach, and he seemed to be enjoying the pleasant sea breeze as he stood near the open window. *Ahh... This is a really nice spot*.

The shining rays of the sun were starting to fade, and through the window, he had a clear view of the water that glimmered with a splendid orange hue in the distant horizon. He could also hear the sound of the crashing waves and the wind outside, as well as the occasional cry of some seagulls.

To Ryūji, who lived in a town that was fairly well-populated even if it couldn't be called a city, this place was just like another world. It had the kind of atmosphere where a guy would want to invite a girl he liked to go out for a walk, talking about the future together while taking a leisurely stroll on the beach and listening to the sound of the waves... But then, a shrill cry invaded Ryūji's thoughts and dragged him back to the real world.

"I said let go! You damned midget~!"

"No way! I can't handle spicy stuff! This roux is no good!"

"You're so noisy. If you're going to act this selfishly, then shouldn't you have gone along to do the shopping?! This roux is fine! I actually prefer spicy things! Here, Takasu-kun, catch!"

"..."

Receiving the box of roux from Ami, he just realized he'd been dragged into quite a mess when,

"Ack...~!"

Ryūji's face twisted in pain. In an acrobatic display, Taiga had leaped up and latched onto one of Ryūji's arms , catching him somewhere between his waist and thigh with her bare feet in a crab-scissors and getting on top of him.

"Noooo~!"

"Ouch...that hurt!"

And following up, she shook him in the same way a giant monkey might shake a tree, so vigorously that he was worried she might dislocate his arm.

"What the heck?! What do you think you're doing?! And why did you climb on me?!"

"Ryūji, you can make a delicious meal even without the roux, right?! You've done it before, haven't you?! Frying with flour and adding in spices, you know how to do all that, don't you?! So then, just do the same thing tonight, because this roux is no good!"

Without waiting for Ryūji to respond, Ami muttered " So selfish" before trying to yank Taiga off,

"Using premade roux is the simplest way, and it'll taste good too!"

"Ryūji's cooking tastes much, much better though~!"

With them practically yelling into his ears, his arm being yanked, and being shaken about against his will, Ryūji eventually got to his knees. He pulled Taiga off of him with one hand, then pushed Ami aside with one hand,

"...Fine! I get it already!... But Taiga, since I don't have my prized spice collection, I can't bring out the same flavor as usual."

"Ehh?!"

Fufu, Ami laughed derisively, as if to say 'Hah, see that!'.

"But, still... It's because you dislike spicy food, right? So I'll just separate a portion especially for you, and I'll season it with lots of milk and ketchup to make yours sweet."

"...Ooh~..."

While Taiga was still a bit displeased, she had at least stopped yelling, but taking her place,

"You're spoiling her!"

This time, Ami puffed out her cheeks. Furrowing her brow and narrowing her eyes, she had her hands on her hips like a little kid.

"Geez Takasu-kun, once again, you're giving special treatment only to Aisaka-san! If you keep this up, aren't other girls going to end up disliking you?"

And yet as she spoke, she had still retained her usual goody-goody pose up until then. Even her anger was just part of the act. However, suddenly twisting her lips and smirking wryly with just half her face, Ami's eyes were starting to fill with the negative feelings that still lingered just beneath the surface. Lowering her voice to the utmost level, she was probably inaudible even to Taiga.

"...Even Minori-chan might end up disliking you, y'know~?"

"Wh...~!"

What did you say? While he had frozen up completely and she was close enough that he could feel her breath on his ear, Ryūji was struck by her extended attack that sounded just like a snippet of a song.

"Ah, I knew it, you're blanching. Fu~h..."

Ami's teasing eyes were wreaking havoc on Ryūji's well-being. Her lips were pulled ever so slightly into a smile,

"Takasu-kun, if you keep acting this way, maybe I'll tell Minori-chan about 'that'... Like 'Takasu-kun peeked at me in the shower'..."

"Y, you weren't actually taking a shower though!"

"...Fufu. Maybe so, but that can't be confirmed anymore, now can it?"

Flipping her hair, Ami pulled away. With a devilish smile on her fair face, she certainly looked beautiful on the outside at least, but there was something definitely warped about it, because it was a blackness inside her that in the end managed to seep to the surface. In any case, Ryūji wasn't able to say another word. *Why did she suddenly... She, in other words, could she have picked up on his feelings for Minori?*

Between the two uncomfortably tense individuals, Taiga settled into place,

"...What was that about Minorin?"

She looked back and forth between Ryūji and Ami, peering into their faces suspiciously. Ami, who had on her normal angelic smile, said "Nothing~" while Ryūji just gulped. And there was one more person present amongst them,

"Did you call? Did you call for me?"

In the cramped space between Taiga and Ami, Minori was standing there... *Just how long has she been here?* Smiling innocently, her pure eyes sparkled as she looked warmly at her friends. Somehow, it seemed like she hadn't picked up on what Ami had said just moments ago. Ryūji discreetly licked his dried lips.

"Hm? Minorin, are you feeling okay now?"

"Yeah, I feel a lot better now that I've rested on a bed for a while, so I thought I'd come help out in the kitchen. Hehehe, I also want to see the rumored 'Divine Blade of Takasu', you know? According to one report, I've heard that Takasu-kun can completely dice an onion in ten seconds?"

Ah, in the face of Minori's smile, Ryūji felt like prostrating himself before her. Because he and Taiga had

used Bakachi No. 1 to scare her, she'd been resting the whole time up until now. And yet, in this place where the actual perpetrator, the primary offender, and even the model for Bakachi No. 1 were gathered, she was kindly bestowing a smile that was lovelier than anyone else's.

"10 seconds is probably impossible...But,"

Even while desperately looking away from her blinding brilliance, he wanted to live up to Minori's expectations as much as he possibly could. He expertly grabbed three onions in one hand,

"15 seconds should be enough."

He declared.

"Oh~! You really said it! Well then, please let me observe your skills. Can I help you somehow? I guess Takasu-kun will be the boss for tonight's cooking, right?"

It wasn't the onions, which he had yet to slice with the knife, that caused him to tear up. "Can I help?" Those simple words had done it. That line that would make him happy pretty much regardless of who said it, the person he wanted to hear it from the most had actually

said those words to him. Turning around without thinking,

"...Hm? What's with that look?"

He ended up staring straight at Taiga. Of course, she had absolutely no intention of helping as she sat down with a plop onto a chair, playing with some yogurt that was out on the table like she really wanted to eat it, at least until Ami tried to confiscate it. Actually, in a certain sense that wasn't the same as with Minori, he would have really liked to hear her offering to help, but... *Oh whatever. Might as well make the best of it.*

"A, alright then Kushieda... Why don't you skin the potatoes."

"O~kay~. I wonder, is there no peeler? How many should I prepare?"

It happened just after Minori had thrust her hand into the bag and pulled out a couple of small potatoes with her delicate fingers.

"Ah, I feel so refreshed!"

A sudden pitter-pattering of bare feet hitting the floor approached the kitchen,

"Oh, have you already started preparing dinner? I know I'm completely hopeless at cooking, but you could have called on me to help set the table at least!"

Kitamura, who had taken a shower first to wash off the sand and smelled freshly of soap, clapped Ryūji on the shoulder. However.

"...H, hey! Your clothes..."

"Whew, it's so hot...Oops! Ah, my bad, so the girls were here?"

"...~?!"

Taiga, who had turned around at the sound of Kitamura's voice, let go of the yogurt. Falling backwards in her chair, hitting the back of her head against the wall, and falling to the floor, Taiga looked like she had swallowed a lethal poison as her face wildly fluctuated, flushing red, blue, and then white as she searched for a place to hide, sticking near the wall until she finally hid herself behind Ami, whom she had just been arguing

with up until only a moment ago. Not yet taking notice of the situation, Ami was twisting herself about in annoyance,

"What the heck are you doing all of a su...Hah?!"

Then she noticed. As if she couldn't believe her eyes, Ami blinked in confusion for a while before directing a scrutinizing gaze at her childhood friend, and then after a certain point where it seemed she'd had enough,

"Yūsaku!!! Have you gone crazy?!

Is what she said. Ryūji sympathized quite readily with her reaction. However, laughing with a "Tehehe", Kitamura just shook his wet head without a single sign of embarrasment,

"I accidentally left my change of clothes in my room. So, I was on my way to get changed now."

"Then why did you have to stop by here first?!"

"Well, that's because I saw Takasu."

"Are you an idiot?!"

"Hahaha, who could have guessed you girls would be here too"... *Laughing like that, this guy who's the class representative/student council vice-president/softball club captain, just what is he trying to conceal...No wait, he's actually not concealing enough.* Showing off a naturally wild style as he only covered the most necessary parts of his lower body with a single towel, he was standing with a steady stance. Even from Ryūji's male perspective, his physique that had been tempered with athleticism was enviably slender and yet firm as well... Now wasn't the time to be saying such things. As it was, he was even more exposed than when he was wearing trunks at the pool. If you were to look at him from behind, it seemed likely that his rear would actually be visible.

"Ta, Taiga, pull it together!"

"...Fuwah..."

And Taiga, who had been in the perfect position to see this foolish guy from behind, had suffered a meltdown. The light had completely gone out of her eyes, and she had assumed a sitting fetal position as she continued to stare at the wall. It seemed she had seen it, his " open-source" rear. He couldn't help thinking that she was really prone to seeing others in the nude.

"Are you some sort of exhibitionist or something? Horrible~"

With the familiarity of a childhood friend, Ami directed a cold gaze at Kitamura's naked body, however,

"Fufufu... I, Kushieda, am not so disinclined to taking on an exhibitionist..."

Whispering in an almost growling tone, Minori lifted her down-turned face,

"You narcissus from above! Give me a nude shot!"

Leaping just like a grasshopper or something, she dove towards the floor. And so, sliding with her shoulder against the floor, she tumbled over like she was break-dancing towards the feet of the near-naked Kitamura,

"What the heck, get away, cut it out!"

"It's too late to be saying that now! You've already gone this far looking like that, hmm?! How are you going to say 'No' or 'Cut it out' as if you're so innocent, huh~?!

Follow the rural customs when you're in the countryside, go get nude in a nudist's colony, this is a surprise shot, you freak!"

She whipped her cellphone out of her pocket and vigorously aimed the camera at Kitamura. It wasn't clear whether or not she actually took a photo, but the wide stance, the exposed rear, and the rapid-fire harassment, they wouldn't forget any of it.

"S, suddenly this seems really embarrassing!"

Hit by a severely delayed bout of self-consciousness, Kitamura finally prepared to retreat out of the kitchen. Right at that moment,

Flutter

"...~!"

In the exact moment the towel, that had been preserving decency, fell to the floor, Ryūji leaped forward to prevent the girls' eyes from being soiled. With that last ditch dive, he miraculously covered Kitamura's nether regions with a plate,

"...Something just now, some sort of afterimage was... Something like...Black...?"

Grimacing, Minori seemed to have noticed something from the inner corner of her eye. Sitting firmly on the floor Japanese-style, she tilted her head.

"It, it's the seaweed ghost. Maybe."

While doing his utmost to conceal the nudity, Ryūji gave a silent prayer. *Forget, let's all just forget.* And so, he turned to Minori,

"Kushieda, I can handle things from here, so why don't you go rest in the living room for a while? We'll make sure to call you when the curry's done, okay?"

"...Really?... I guess I'll do just that then...For some reason, the seaweed spirit's afterimage is stuck in my head... Or it's burnt into my retina or something, I'm not quite sure..."

Minori made her way out of the kitchen with uncertain footsteps. As soon as he had finished watching her leave, Ryūji's eyes turned brutally fierce as if he were a demon,

"Geez you, you're seriously horrible! The worst!"

He smacked Kitamura's bare bottom with the plate (It would be fine for Taiga to use this plate afterwards).

"Did you come on this trip just so you could pull something like this?! Even if you plan to run for student council president in the next election, I won't vote for you !"

"I'm reflecting on what I did though!"

Ryūji kicked the guy he had even called his best friend out of the kitchen and towards the second floor where the bedrooms were. *Seriously, what's with this guy*; he really wanted to show this situation to Mayu and Nanako and the other female Kitamura supporters. He'd really like to let them know that their 'fun to tease but lovable Maruo-kun' had done such a foolhardy thing like this. *Hey, isn't that right, Noto, Haruta* He inadvertantly recalled the smiles of his friends who weren't here right now. Phantasmic visions of those guys whirled about him, whispering. *Yeah, that's right, Takasu... It's really weird that that guy is so popular... It's totally incomprehensible... That guy is also a fool... No, that guy is such a fool... Ah, that's right, that's right, just like in this case.*

"...Geez, damnit, that guy..."

Even as he prepared the trashbag in order to get back to peeling the onions that he had put on hold earlier, his malice had yet to fade. He had finally gotten the chance to be next to Minori in the kitchen, yet he would have never guessed that Kitamura of all people would get in the way like that.

"Ah~~, Minori-chan is so pitiable~~"

The one who had murmured in a happy tone that lacked even a hint of pity was Ami. Turning around in a fit of anger,

"...Kawashima, get over here and help. Your childhood friend's bungling has cost us a pair of hands, after all."

Gesturing with his chin, he indicated the potatoes that Minori had left unpeeled, but,

"Huh?"

The time lapse preceding her response had been practically nonexistent.

Ami's face momentarily twisted, in a way that made him want to tell her she really didn't need to make such a face. Ami practically spit as she prefaced with a "You've gotta be kidding" before facing him with a faint smile,

"Why should Ami-chan have to?"

As it was, he couldn't choose just one term to faithfully describe her personality from the myriad of characteristics such as "selfish", "tyrannical", " narrow-minded", "arrogant" and so on. *Why does Ami-chan have to cook? Why do I, the beautiful and cute Ami-chan, have to do anything with potatoes? Why oh why would Ami-chan, who is rich, elite, and a model, have to be an assistant for someone like you?*

Ryūji knew exactly what Ami wanted to actually say, and so he just nodded.

"...Fine then, go take some barley tea to Kushieda."

"Eh~? But I was going to stay here and watch Takasu-kun cook...Upuh!"

As soon as he deftly sliced the onion in half, Ami, who had been looking in her bag, quickly turned her face away.

"...F, fine, I got it! I'll go take the barley tea then!... It's like I'm being chased out or something... I just can't stand it..."

Her eyes immediately going red, Ami made her way out of the kitchen with a cup in one hand even while looking disgruntled. That just left Ryūji and Taiga alone in the kitchen, but,

"Hey, are you alright?"

"..."

Taiga still remained near the wall, her shoulders visibly heaving as she wheezed. The shock of seeing Kitamura's rear end must have been enormous. And she likely hadn't forgotten the trauma of seeing Ami either. Without thinking, he extended his hand to grab her arm and help her stand, but,

"...Hey you, this isn't the time to be worrying about other people."

Shaking off his grasp, Taiga unsteadily got to her feet using the wall for support.

"I'm seriously fine... I'll just override this trauma with an even stronger trauma... Yacchan's big breasts, Yacchan's big breasts, Yacchan's big breasts.... Ohh~..."

"Don't go making someone's parent out to be traumatizing."

In any case, Taiga finally gave a single shake of her head, and her breathing seemed to have returned to normal. Glaring up at Ryūji's eyes while he worriedly peered at her face, she said only one thing.

"You dim-witted dog."

"Haa~", sighing in a seemingly exaggerated way, Taiga had gone right back to speaking hostilely.

"I'm completely stunned. Today of all days, how could you have passed up this chance to cook with Minorin after all we went through? And it was basically your one and only chance to show off your skills."

"Even if that's true, there's really no helping it, right? Since it wasn't my fault. It was all because of Kitamura."

"There you go blaming other people again! This is why dogs merely crawl! It's like you don't realize what a predicament this is, not at all!"

Flipping her hair, Taiga scrunched up her face as if deeply depressed, and expressing an even greater degree of pity, she stared straight at Ryūji.

"W, what do you mean, predicament?"

"Because on this trip, right now, it's not going well at all, don't you see? Only going halfway with scaring her, and then not even making any further appeals. Seriously, you haven't been putting in nearly enough effort in getting closer to Minorin at all. I almost can't believe it."

"...Come on, don't say that. Besides, didn't we succeed in scaring her earlier? You know, with that thing. The Bakachi No. 1."

"But, the plan isn't moving forward at all. You can't possibly think that just that alone was enough, can you?"

"...It's not like I'm thinking that, but,"

Cruelly clicking her tongue and shrugging her shoulders, Taiga interrupted him as if to say that listening to Ryūji's vague reply would be worthless to her.

"Don't make pointless excuses. I'm cooperating; I'd do practically anything if it meant destroying that dog-filled future. But, I just can't go so far as to manipulate Minorin's heart. That part's all up to you. To put it bluntly, up until now, I still haven't seen you showing even the tiniest bit of effort."

"..."

After listening to all that, he couldn't think of a single thing he could say in return. Looking down at the onion he had left cut in two and forgotten, Ryūji remained silent thinking, *She's absolutely right*.

"Ah geez, what an irritating face... From now on, you should try putting your blood, sweat, and tears into turning things around, don't you think? I'm just cooperating by doing what I can. And right now, when it comes to cooperation, I can really only do something like this..."

As she continued muttering, she carefully opened the freezer. And then what she took out was the thing they had hidden just in case they might want to use it again, the Bakachi No. 1. Also known as the seaweed spirit.

"...It's repetitive, but we don't have any other options, so I guess it's better than nothing."

With her bare hands, she tore off the long thread they had used to dangle the whole thing from the ceiling. Then, sticking the seaweed onto one end of the broom that had been left standing in the kitchen corner, she continued speaking.

"There. Now it's the prickly thrusting imitation ghost, Bakachi No. 2."

"...Huh, how simplistic."

Taiga was looking to one side of the kitchen at the dirt-sweeping window, an opening that was really meant for getting rid of rubbish but apparently also led directly to the wood deck. Peering about carefully like a cat,

"If I go through here, I can make my way along the deck until I'm just outside the living room. Then since

Minorin's sitting on the window-side of the sofa, I should be able to discreetly open the window and surprise her with this thing right here...Of course, you'll have to pretend like I'm actually still inside."

"Pretend you say, but just how...?"

"At least handle that much on your own, sheesh."

Removing her slippers and silencing her footsteps, Taiga was just about to make her way outside when...

"~!"

Clatter, roll, roll... She had knocked over a bowl. The two of them froze momentarily, sticking to the wall and not breathing, but it seemed like no one else had noticed. Picking the bowl up carefully, Taiga put it back where it belonged and then sneakily made her way out to the wood deck via the sweepout window.

So, if he was supposed to pretend as if Taiga was still nearby, then...something like this maybe?

"...Oh! That's a rather good approach, Taiga! You're surprisingly skilled at this!"

Chop, chop, chop, chop... While quite skillfully handling the kitchen knife to finely dice the onion himself, Ryūji pretended to chat in a loud voice. Hopefully, it was enough so that everyone could hear him loud and clear.

"Hey, would you mind getting me that bowl over there ? Oh! Thank you! Okay then, take care of the carrots next! Oh, nice! You do it rather well, don't you Taiga!"

This farce of a one-man play sounded completely unbelievable. But, it was what he had to do, for now at least. Even as Ryūji's face turned stiff, he continued to frantically raise his voice.

"Alright then Taiga! Next, let's..."

Then it happened.

"Gyaaa~aa~ah!..." A horrific scream emanated from the living room. The second after he looked up and thought, *Alright*,

"...I really did it. The whole thing went almost too perfectly...!"

Taiga sneakily slipped back inside via the sweepout window at the side of the kitchen. Closing the window carefully, they high-fived without making a sound.

"It was just Minorin sitting on the sofa, so I simply tapped her on the shoulder with this guy here from the other side of the curtain outside!"

"Good job!"

Giving a thumbs up and nodding to one another, they both carefully picked up things like a knife or carrots to take with them,

"That scream just now, what happened?!"

"Minorin, are you ok?"

And pretended to rush over. They made a lot of noise as they ran over to the living room. When they arrived, they saw Minori lying prone on the floor with her limbs outstretched,

"Minori-chan, what's the matter?! Pull it together!"

"Kushieda, get a hold of yourself!"

Ami and the now clothed Kitamura were both tending to Minori. She looked distressedly stiff, and for some reason, she was pointing at Kitamura,

"I, i, i, it appeared... It really came out... A spirit possessing Kitamura... Kitamura's doppleganger did...!"

"Me?! What?!"

Somehow, it had turned into a story about Kitamura's doppleganger. And then seeming to lose most of her strength, Minori became visibly covered in goosebumps and started shivering uncontrollably. Perhaps overstimulated past the blanching point, her face actually flushed pink instead.

"Mi, Minorin..."

As the actual perpetrator, Taiga very timidly moved closer. Taiga should be experiencing the same pangs of guilt that Ryūji was feeling. Sitting down gently beside Minori,

"Ta, Taiga i...is it really you...?"

"Yeah."

She wiped away the perspiration from Minori's forehead, seeming extremely regretful.

"...Taiga... Be careful... There's some sort of malicious intent hanging about this mansion...Oooh~."

"I, is that so...?"

Taiga's eyes shifted dubiously. *That's right, that's right, as the inflictor of said "malicious intent", Taiga must be feeling quite horrible right now.* As for Ryūji, he couldn't even look Minori straight in the eyes as he was feeling a sharp pain in his chest.

"Mi, Minorin, I wonder if there's anything I can do for you..."

"...The curry... Is the curry done yet?"

"Not even Ryūji can finish cooking in less than five minutes, Minorin..."

"I see... In that case...Be sure to make mine an extra-extra spicy one please... I'll take...one that'll really send this fear flying if you don't mind..."

Gently caressing Taiga's cheek with a trembling hand, Minori eventually used up the last of her strength and closed her eyes. Giving a firm nod, Taiga reassuringly whispered "I'll definitely make it for you". If it was for Minori's sake, it seemed like Taiga would even resolutely toss aside her selfishness about having a specially prepared dish.

Ryūji had likewise come to a firm decision. If making a spicy curry could alleviate these fierce pangs of guilt, then he'd go to any lengths to make it spicy for her, no matter what.

And so, Ryūji transformed into a cooking devil.

"Uwah~! Amazing!"

Making the food dance freely in the air with skilled handling of the frying pan to where Ami, who had peeked in, was rendered speechless, Ryūji used some of Ami's father's liquor to flambe various fruits for dessert, then switching pans, he started making a simple Takasu-styled chutney,

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

To Kitamura, the former village chief of the nudist colony who had asked just now, he gave the order, " Wash the rice! Wash it like your life depends on it!",

"...Taiga. You understand, right?!"

With a glint in his eyes that was like the edge of a sharp Yakuza blade, he directed his gaze at Taiga. It's not like he was trying to collect on an overdue loan by selling Taiga off somewhere; it's just that he was pressing her to make a decision.

"Yeah. You don't have your spice collection with you, so for right now, you have to use this instead..."

Taiga had nodded. She held in her hands a red spice that came attached with the roux and had a label that

read: "Seasoning for extra spiciness * Shockingly HOT (Because it is extremely spicy, please adjust flavor using only very minute quantities. This is a warning that product may also cause harm to consumer's health)". If it was Minori's wish, then there was no helping it... With a resolute expression, she tore the package of spice completely open. For Taiga who had never tasted anything more than mildly spicy, this was an adventure, no wait, she was just being completely reckless and foolhardy.

Shake, shake, shake... Into the pot it went, where it would take about fifteen minutes to cook. And then, saying "I found this. It's from last year, but maybe we can use it anyway?", Ami took the pack of curry and chili pepper that she had discovered lying in the kitchen drawer and without a second thought tossed that in too, resetting the fifteen minutes they'd have to wait for the dish to finish.

And thus according to Ryūji's unspoken plan to avoid overcooking and yield something akin to the school-served curry, the potatoes were still in round pieces and the onions were still recognizable when the simple curry filled with lots of carrots and lightly browned pork was finished.

"...Even if I try to put it in a single word like 'spicy', or for example 'salty', the wasabi will make your nose burn, the chili peppers will burn your tongue, it'll burn your throat...And I think you'll experience a wide variety of spiciness even beyond that. I sampled tonight's curry earlier, and I have to say it's got an extreme taste that knocked me straight in the head. I stuck to Kushieda's request, but even so, I tried to make it simply, along the lines of villa-type cuisine."

With a helping of rice and curry on each of their plates, they were all seated around the dining room table, and the other members were gazing steadily at Ryūji's lips as he continued his exposition because they were swollen, practically throbbing.

For such roe-lips to be caused by just a taste, they wondered then just what further potential might lie in wait. At the quiet dining table where the sound of the waves continued to resound, a spicy aroma was already wafting through the air.

"...So anyway, prepare yourselves and dig in. Itadakimasu!"

"Itadakimas~su!" they echoed back, and everyone took a spoon in hand, opened their mouths and quickly took a mouthful. A silence prevailed over the table for merely a second.

"...Hm? Isn't it rather mild?"

Was Minori's response.

"Yeah, yeah, but it's okay in a normal sense."

Ami replied.

"The pork, I've got a fatty part..."

Taiga said.

"Yeah, not bad, not bad! As expected of Takasu!"

Spoke the nudist.

It took about three seconds; that was how long until the general consensus of "What the heck" turned into voiceless screams.

"...!..."

Just as everyone was about to take their second bite, they all suddenly stopped moving their spoons,

"T...there, there it is! This stuff really does have a kick to it!"

"H, h, ho~~t!! Water, water, I need water!"

"Hot~, oww~, it's spicy~, gah~ I spilt my water!"

"Ah~...*cough*, *cough*, it, my throat...*cough*!"

While watching the others all continue to writhe in pain, Ryūji discreetly turned his focus on Minori. "Yeah! There it is! What a kick! I really felt it! Ooh, there it is again!" ...Minori was really hyped as she shoveled the curry down her throat in a manly fashion. Then, noticing Ryūji's gaze,

"Ta, Takasu-kun! You're the best! It's super spicy, it's so good! Spicy, great, first-rate! I'm seriously happy! This totally exceeded my expectations; it totally blew my fear and sadness away!"

She gave him a thumbs up. His mouth felt like it was being burned away by the flames of purgatory, but deep down inside, he couldn't help but feel a gradual surge of happiness and embarrassment.

"Ah, well... It's because you said you'd like for it to be spicy..."

"Eh~, so you actually made it spicy like this just for me ?! Oh my, I'm deeply moved! Well then, it looks like I'll have to take seconds!"

Laughing and smiling even as her face flushed red from the spiciness, Minori showed Ryūji her plate that had been cleared clean. Going "Uwah~!" on the inside, he was practically dissolving in euphoria. If doing this sort of thing could yield such bliss, he would make this every single day of his life ...Of course, he couldn't say such a thing, and so without saying a word, Ryūji took Minori's plate and proceeded to dish out a second helping for her.

Chapter 4

After the shockingly spicy curry dinner,

"All right then, you can leave the clean-up to me!"

The only one in high spirits, Minori stacked up the empty plates and took them to the kitchen. On the other hand, the others were all lying around immobilized, mentally tottering back and forth between 'It was spicy but still good' and 'It was good but still spicy', as despite the throbbing pain of their lips and mouths, they couldn't help but have seconds, and now with their full bellies, swollen lips, and utter fatigue, it didn't seem possible to even stand up.

However, it just wouldn't be right to make Minori handle clearing the table by herself. Ryūji finally stood up as well to go help her, but then Taiga grabbed onto the end of his T-shirt.

"Hm? What is it?"

"…I think, I might have eaten too much spicy food all at once. I'd like some medicine for my stomach…"

"Does your stomach hurt?"

"…Not sure…"

Furrowing her brow, she looked as if she couldn't quite tell how she felt herself as she rubbed her stomach and tilted her head.

"I don't have any stomach medicine on me. Kawashima, did you bring any?"

"Ehh, I don't think so…I only have aspirin for headaches."

Thinking 'Hm, what are we supposed to do?', Ryūji was pressing his hand against Taiga's forehead to make sure she didn't have a fever when Kitamura stood up.

"I brought some. I've got painkillers, digestion medicine, and mixed types, so come to my room. You can read the labels and decide which one fits."

"…"

"What's wrong?"

Playing with the lace on the end of her sleeve even though Kitamura had been kind enough to say all that,

Taiga was fidgeting like a weather-forecasting cat by pawing her face and the back of her ear. Thinking 'This really isn't the time to be acting shy, now is it?', Ryūji grabbed her by her elbow and forced her to stand,

"Come on, go with him."

Ryūji gave her small back a slight shove. Even though it looked like Taiga might fall over from that push, she somehow got her legs moving and followed after Kitamura, and so the two of them walked out of the living room. Without thinking, he was keeping a worried eye on her rear as she left,

"…Ah!"

"You really spaced out."

He had noticed Ami's approach much too late. Having silently drawn closer, Ami was already leaning herself slightly over the table right in front of Ryūji's eyes before he knew it,

"If Takasu-kun's going to worry so much about that girl, you should've gone too."

While her large eyes slightly narrowed in a seemingly malicious manner, her rosy lips were completely caught up in a smile that hinted that she actually found something quite entertaining.

"…What's wrong with my worrying about Taiga?"

"Ooh, you got defensive."

"If someone else had gotten a stomachache, whether it were Kitamura, Kushieda, or even you, I'd worry just the same."

"Ehh~, is that true? Well then, Ami-chan thinks~, she too might~, have a stomachache~."

While making her Chihuahua-like eyes water, Ami sat down with a flop next to Ryūji,

"Just kidding."

Without even giving him a chance to actually fall for the lie, she bluntly dropped the whole smiling thing and stuck out her tongue a bit, shrugging her shoulders. *Just*

what in the world is this girl thinking---Already fed up with being teased, Ryūji merely stared back at Ami's cool and pretty face.

"…Geez you…"

"Wha~~t?"

Probably completely aware of Ryūji's exasperation, Ami reapplied her angelic smile, her lips pursed and eyes widened. Those eyes of hers were twinkling brightly like stardust. Yet even though her appearance was almost unbelievably beautiful, beneath the table she was just like a neighborhood delinquent. Sitting squarely with one long leg crossed over the other knee, her open thighs were a show of poor manners as she continuously swiveled her ankle. It seemed like she wasn't even going to try hiding it.

Ahh, Ryūji thought looking up towards the ceiling, feeling sympathetic for all the Ami-chan fans throughout the country, and yet, he involuntarily smiled.

"…How should I put it, I'm not bored watching you."

"That, is that a compliment?"

"It's something of a complicated, fine line I guess…"

It's what he seriously thought. That is, that she's a strange one all right.

At first glance, she was an incomparably jewel-like beauty. However, in truth, she was a wickedly malicious woman. But nevertheless,

"A fine line? Eh? Me…Complicated?...What's that supposed to mean…To say that I'm complicated…"

Next to Ryūji making a serious face and tilting her head, that expression of hers by itself was somehow endearing. So normal it was surprising, or just surprisingly normal might be a better way to put it. Or maybe he should say that it made him rethink his opinion, reaffirming that even she was just like any other sixteen or seventeen year old girl.

Such a girl who, no matter how you looked at her, just didn't seem to match up with her appearances was quite the oddity, Ryūji thought. But, it wasn't as if he disliked that about her.

"…What is it~, you've just been staring at me the whole time. Hmm~, could it be you're bewitched? Mm,

that's okay, it's fine, I know it can't be helped, since I'm so very cute after all…"

Yep yep, totally understandable, she of course nodded with a smugly pleased look on her face. But surprisingly, a strangely child-like smile gradually bloomed like a light coating on Ami's pleased face.

"Oh, I know! Hey, hey, Takasu-kun, you know, we could go to the beach and---"

She was trying to say something when,

"Oops, I forgot some of the dishes, didn't I?"

The two of them heard some casual footsteps. Humming to herself, Minori had returned to the dining room from the kitchen. In high spirits and not directing any criticism at Ami and Ryūji who were simply chatting away without lending a hand, she stacked up the plates and cups that she had left behind on the table and tried to carry them all in both hands,

"…That's dangerous, so just take the cups only."

From beside her, Ryūji took the plates off her hands.

"Ah, you're going to help me? You don't have to Takasu-kun, since you took care of the cooking, I'll handle clearing the table."

"It's ok, I'll help."

Holding the plates in one hand, he hastily wiped the edges of the table with a cleaning cloth. He turned about, considering making Ami help out as well, but,

"I'm really horrible at kitchen work, you know, so rather than be a bother, I'll take my leave now."

Lightly smiling while murmuring her excuse, Ami quickly got up from her seat. Leaving without any chance to be stopped, it was amazing how fast her retreat was. *So she really hates cleaning that much, huh.* But, it was a lucky break that he'd get to work with Minori, just the two of them. For now at least, he was rather grateful for Ami's queen-like tendencies.

"Is this really ok? Weren't you in the middle of chatting with Ami-chan?"

Ryūji responded to Minori's concern by waving his hand as if to say it wasn't important, and the two of them headed to the kitchen.

Minori had cleaned the kitchen thoroughly, with everything from the pans to the knives so well cleaned and organized that even Ryūji had to acknowledge it. And, as he was glancing around in amazement, Minori took the plates off Ryūji's hands and before he could even say "Ah, I'll take care of it",

"Alright, washing complete!"

She had finished in the blink of an eye. Of course, he had no complaints with the level of her skill as she quickly set the dish in the rack to dry.

"…Huh, you've got quite the technique, don't you?"

"Hehe, I guess so? I'm always stuck doing the tough cleaning at my part-time job, you know, and I always wanted to try and finish as quickly as possible!...So I'd run around with that in mind, and I eventually got rather good at doing this sort of stuff."

And so, he had discovered another one of Minori's good points. That is, he meant the loveliness of her smiling face as she was being praised that was somewhat shy and embarrassed but also heart-wrenching and just a bit proud. Seriously honest and straight-forward, he

wished that he could have been born as someone like her . He admired her unpretentious purity from the bottom of his heart. If only he were like Minori, then the circumstances or the face he had been born with wouldn' t matter, and rather than constantly torturing himself in anxiety, he probably would have grown up straight and unwavering, just like a bamboo shoot. That's right, if only everyone in the world was like Minori, then things like war and disaster would likely vanish. And so happily, everyone would live while full of laughter just like her.

Without noticing the shining look in Ryūji's eyes and continuing to laugh with her eyes drawn to a line, Minori suddenly looked up with an 'Oh yeah' expression.

"I'll give Takasu-kun something nice."

Opening the fridge and sticking her face in, she pulled out a couple pieces of jam cake. They were the same ones that they had all gotten a piece of after dinner, but,

"There were just two left over, you know. I thought we might have a sumo competition later, like a battle royale

with no holds barred or something, but…hehe, this'll be our little secret, so let's eat them together. Vanilla or green tea, which would you like?"

"G…green tea."

"O~kay~."

Smiling widely, Minori handed one of them over to Ryūji. Then, glancing about the area,

"It would be bad if we're spotted by Taiga. She's a glutton after all. Takasu-kun, we'll have to eat it all in one bite."

Having decided to down the rather large cake in one go, she tore off the wrapper. *Wait wait, that's absolutely impossible*, Ryūji meant to stop her,

"…You can get to the deck from over there, so let's eat them out there."

He pointed to the dust chute that Taiga had just gone through earlier with the Bakachi No. 2. To Minori, who went "Ehh?" with her eyes wide open, he responded "

Shh" while making the shushing pose. Opening the door silently, he was still in his slippers so the sand felt rough as he went out onto the wooden deck.

For a moment, he closed his eyes against a strong sea breeze that practically pushed him back…When he looked out, he saw the cover of night draped in the sky over the ocean. With only the stars and the moon pallidly illuminating the breaking waves, the sound of the crashing sea in the chilling darkness was more actively peaceful than utter silence.

"Watch your step."

"Yeah."

Walking silently towards the sea and away from the living room, they eventually sat down on the deck with their legs stretched out facing the sea. Even forgetting about uncovering the jam cake, Minori simply looked out towards the night-time sea.

"…Huh…It's rather dark out here, isn't it…Wait, could that be, reflected moonlight?"

They could see a path of shining white reflecting off the ocean surface near the coast where she was pointing.

Ryūji noticed the slow moving celestial body shining in the sky, but "It's a UFO" was of course not something he'd say. He was fully aware after all. That it was merely a man-made satellite.

As if disturbed by the silence, Ryūji busied himself with unwrapping the jam cake,

"It…It's quite beautiful out here, isn't it?"

He took a bite. Of course, he barely registered how it tasted or anything---By some stroke of luck, the two of them had ended up discreetly out of sight. Minori's hair fluttered in the sea breeze, and the steady moonlight illuminated her profile against the darkness,

"…Takasu-kun."

Nervous, his shoulders trembled. Becoming entranced by Minori in this night-time setting, he was having trouble keeping his gaze away from her, as if she were drawing him in.

"The green tea type, is it good?"

"…Yeah."

"What type did you have before?"

"…Ogura."

"Which one's better?"

"…The green tea."

Two bites, three bites, he frantically bit into his ice cream jam cake. Things had gotten this far through natural happenstance, but he had no idea what he was supposed to do from here. Could this possibly be a ' chance'? But, just what sort of chance was it then? In a situation like this, just what in the world did people talk about?

"H, hey, Ku, Kushieda, you know, I was wondering,"

"Hmm?"

"D, do you have, a boyfriend?"

---Now he'd gone and done it. He instantly regretted it . Too impatient, he'd accidentally overstepped the boundary. He'd actually gone and said something like that.

Minori didn't say anything. As if she hadn't heard him , she simply remained silent. *This sort of silence is the worst . Minori Kushieda, I beg you, please hurry up and dispel this weird atmosphere with one of your usual random outbursts. Please, just act like that question just now didn't even happen.*

Don't just remain silent like that while we're practically sinking into the silence like this, please.

If even one more second passed like that, he seriously thought he was going to die---

"Hey, Takasu-kun. That seaweed ghost earlier, do you think it's still hanging around here?"

"Uh…Eh?"

"He~~y! Seaweed ghost~! Where do you hail from?"

"…Pff."

He involuntarily spat out his jam cake, but that was okay. *There it was, her fool-like speech. Nice, very nice, with that usual strangeness, with the exact type of weird outburst I was thinking of, you've canceled out my faux pas*…Meeting Minori's gaze, Ryūji definitely felt his heart stop for a moment. As if his life was actually ending.

"Takasu-kun, have you ever seen a ghost?"

Minori was staring directly into Ryūji's eyes. Despite the absurdity of the question, her eyes were serious and unflinching, yet her gaze still seemed gentle and unusually fragile.

"What…Well, no, but…"

"You know, I really believe that ghosts exist."

She nodded 'yes yes' to herself, but she followed up with a strongly emphasized "However".

"However, to be honest, I've never seen one, so you know those spirit mediums, those so-called "people who've witnessed ghosts"? Truthfully, I don't believe in them at all. There's no reason to think they can really see anything, and it's not like there are people who can actually communicate with ghosts. Those people who say they can are all just cons in it for the money, is what I believe."

Without understanding where she was going with this , Ryūji unthinkingly stared at Minori's face in profile. As Minori faced the darkened sea, staring intensely as if

looking for something that Ryūji wasn't aware of, she breathed ever so lightly as she kept searching.

"…And, I think there's something else that's almost the same. You know, I believe that someday I'll find someone I deeply love, and we'll start dating, get married, and live happily ever after. But, realistically, I've never felt it happen with anyone."

Shifting her feet gently back and forth while facing the ocean, Minori was tracing a curve of white with her tiptoes in the corner of Ryūji's vision.

"It's only natural that, as early as middle school or high school, there are people who become attracted to one another, start dating, lose interest, and break up, forming ordinary relationships. There's real love, they say…Those people seem quite far away to me. Aren't there a lot of people who say "I can really sense something" or "I saw it"? The type claiming "Ah, my shoulders feel heavy, there are so many of them right over there, just look right there". So it seems like the same sort of thing. Just as much as I'll want to doubt them, thinking 'Do they really see ghosts?', I'll end up thinking 'Are they really in love?'. I just don't see it. As much as I believe, it continuously eludes me. I've never

experienced any of it for myself, y'know. These things that other people speak of as simply natural, they've never happened to me. And so that's why, I just can't believe in such things. I'm left on the outside…I want to believe, but I've kind of given up. The most I can do is enviously watch 'the ones who can see' with my finger in my mouth, cheering them on from the sidelines. Just that, is a connection, I guess…What a bunch of lies! It's all a delusion! A figment of your imagination!...is what I want to shout because I still can't shake my doubt. So, the answer to the question earlier, is "I don't"."

Spitting all that out in one go, she looked concerned over whether or not Ryūji understood what she was saying as she turned back again to look at his face.

"…Takasu-kun, can you, see ghosts?"

Slowly, he licked his lips.

Making sure not to get overexcited or tremble, Ryūji cautiously started speaking.

"…I've never seen one, but I guess I…believe they exist."

"So you're the same as me?"

He shook his side to side.

"I'm someone who 'wants to see'. I would even go to a haunted area and peer into the darkness…It seems like you're someone who simply believes. It's not the same. Because you actually get really scared, right? So in a way, isn't it more like you think they don't exist? But because you sense something, it scares you, right?"

Minori was oddly silent, even forgetting to blink as she continued to stare at Ryūji. Desperately trying to figure out why he had started arguing, he finally thought of something. He hadn't wanted to hear Minori say such a thing. That such a person---in other words, someone to love---would never appear, was something he absolutely didn't want to hear her say. Ryūji, who hoped to someday have a mutual relationship with Minori, took her earlier words like a death sentence, as something he wished she wouldn't say.

Right now, even if Minori hadn't said it outright, he was painfully aware that she wasn't in love with him. Hearing her speech, it wasn't like he wouldn't be feeling hurt on the inside. But, instead of crying in pain, he wanted to hang onto the possibility that, in the future, he might become someone for her.

And so, because he wanted to know just why Minori, who was an ordinarily cute and apparently normal girl who could chat with all the guys, would be thinking things like that, he simply had no choice.

"…So, it might be something else. Even for people who sense spirits, actually seeing them might not be such a standard thing."

"Eh?..."

"Seeing a ghost would no doubt surprise some people quite a bit, right? Even if they saw it, it wouldn't be unusual for them to rationalize it away as 'simply impossible'. Like the people who, even if they see it at first, when they don't see it the next time, they'll wonder if it wasn't just an illusion or a dream. And also, there should be those who started out like you thinking that it was absolutely impossible to see such things who ended up seeing it and had their perspectives changed, right? In other words, how should I put it…I doubt that would be considered ordinary by any means. I think it was because they continued thinking, 'I want to see' and put in an extreme amount of effort, and so they finally saw it for themselves. Therefore, you don't need to so firmly believe that you won't ever experience those things in

your life, right? And you don't need to think, 'It's all a lie ' without giving it a second thought…I, that is, how should I say it…"

Ryūji noticed Minori holding her breath while her eyes were wide open and staring at him. While he couldn't figure out what she was thinking, he got the feeling that she had at least received his message.

So, he was able to say these words.

"…I, hope that someday, you'll be able, to see a spirit. I hope you'll want to see it. I kind of feel bad saying this to you since you get scared easily, but…a spirit who wants to be seen by you, just might exist, somewhere in the world…That's kind of what I think at least."

Without regret, he was able to voice his thoughts.

"…So you see…A lot of weird things happened today, right? Attempts to get your attention, like 'look at me', 'I' m right here', 'find me'...was what some spirit was saying."

Or rather, it was me…Of course, he didn't go so far as to say that part out loud.

"A---"

A moment later, Minori unexpectedly closed her mouth. She gazed up towards the night sky, and seemingly perplexed by something, she suddenly hesitated and didn't say anything.

"…Why exactly, did you tell me all that?"

Whispering only in his heart, 'for me, that ghost is you ', Ryūji averted his gaze from Minori's profile. The blackness of her eyes as she gazed at the night sky had become too much, making him feel like he was melting away. Taking a somewhat deep breath right next to him and giving just the slightest hint of a smile, she replied.

"You know, for some reason today, I kept thinking that I was being jumped by a ghost. And yet, I didn't see anything. Then, just now, I saw something. A UFO---or a satellite that looked kind of like a UFO. And at first, I thought 'Ah', but then I realized, of course that's not it… So in the end, I didn't see it, even though it felt so close by…or something…And so, I don't know why, but I just felt like talking to Takasu-kun about it."

"…So weird…"

Well, that was how he responded, but Ryūji had also had that thought. That is, that the shining object that passed by in the night sky looked just like a UFO. Also, he knew what it was that had surprised Minori. It was his own feelings of love.

It wasn’t a mystery of the world like spirits or UFO’s were. He was right at Minori’s side. That much should be apparent to anyone who'd look.

Letting the wind blow past as he sat next to Minori, Ryūji just watched the shifting black sea and thought to himself. If Minori could see it, that alone would make him happy, is what he was thinking. As long as she took notice, even if she were to suddenly tire of him and toss him aside, that would be much better than if she never noticed his feelings at all.

* * *

"…Ryūji…"

He had just finished washing his hands after relieving himself and was opening the bathroom door.

"Hm?...Taiga, is that you…?"

It was 1 a.m.

Perhaps it was because they had gotten up early or maybe it had been all the commotion, but everyone had ended up going to bed early, and the late night atmosphere was relatively peaceful. The small face that peeked out just slightly beyond one of the doors was faintly illuminated by the bathroom light.

"What's the matter? Can't sleep?"

Keeping his voice down, he gently closed the bathroom door so as not to wake everyone. Taiga slipped out of her room stealthily just like a cat, and without putting on her slippers, she made her way over to him barefoot.

"…It's because, I recognized Ryūji's footsteps."

"…That's quite a feat, almost superhuman."

Her long hair was in a braided style for sleep, and wiping her nose with the sleeve of the summer-styled cotton pajamas that she often wore at home, Taiga nodded. It seemed like a rather childish action, but she didn't seem sleepy as her large cat-like eyes were wide open. Because he had gotten up to go to the bathroom, Ryūji's eyes felt quite clear as well,

"…Should we head down?"

He said as he pointed to the stairs, and Taiga replied, " Yeah".

"…We have to think about tomorrow, and I mean, really think."

"Yeah, that's right…We can't just keep relying on Bakachi No.1 and No.2."

While whispering back and forth, the two of them descended the stairs with muted footsteps. Passing through the hallway and entering the dark living room, they only turned on a small table lamp before sitting down on the sofa.

With the sound of the waves barely resounding amidst the quiet darkness and the gentle light of the lamp illuminating only the table, they could each only see the outline of the other's face. Ryūji tried to adjust the lamp so it would shed even a bit more light their way,

"Oh…This is quite an expensive lamp…"

He took notice of its elaborate craftsmanship. Overall the glass had a light pink matte finish, while the minor trimmings were made of purple glass. It was made so that, passing through the ground glass, the mild flame-like light of the bulb would create a gentle enveloping warmth. The design followed the typical art nouveau style, depicting a dragonfly hovering amidst a scene of forest flowers. He wondered if it might possibly be the work of a super famous designer such as Lalique or Galle, but he couldn't tell for sure.

However, right in front of Ryūji's eyes as he continued staring in amazement, an impolite finger slowly intruded ,

"What is it, this disgusting thing?"

"…Geez, you…"

Taiga mindlessly rubbed the delicate dragonfly carving. The art just didn't match her taste, or maybe he should say that for someone like her who didn't appreciate elegance, art nouveau may as well have been Hell Teacher Nube or some other random thing.

Such a simpleton…Unthinkingly, he was staring at Taiga's pretty fairy-like face when,

"Maybe I'll eat some of the leftover curry."

She said. "Gotta warm it up", she continued. "Ha~h", Ryūji sighed,

"…Stop right there, it's one in the morning, y'know? Do you want to get another stomachache?...Actually, are you even feeling okay right now?"

"I'm fine. My stomach was feeling weird as soon as dinner started, so I didn't get seconds and what I ate wasn't enough."

"I didn't notice that you didn't have seconds…That's unusual. You really must have been feeling awful, huh."

"Yeah. When I got the medicine from Kitamura, he stayed beside me the whole time as I took it, you know,

saying things like “Do you have enough water?” “Did you make sure to take two?” “How do you feel, is it working?”…I got really nervous and left quickly. Then just a little while ago, I took a short nap and now it doesn ’t hurt anymore.”

“I can’t believe you got a stomachache…”

“…By the way, where were you while I was taking the medicine? I didn’t see you anywhere.”

I was with Minori---For some reason, he didn’t want to tell her that. While he wasn’t sure why he felt that way himself, his throat constricted, and looking at the outline of Taiga’s peach-like face that was pallidly lit, for some reason, Ryūji, for some seriously unknown reason,

“I was cleaning my room.”

He lied. In the glow of the lamp, he could see Taiga’s long eyelashes tremble ever so slightly. Her eyes shimmered as she turned somewhat suddenly, though seemingly without much interest, to look at the darkness through the window.

“…Hmph.”

"…I'll go warm up some curry for you."

For some reason---Before Taiga could catch him with her gaze, Ryūji quickly stood up from the sofa.

Gently illuminated by the art nouveau-styled glass lamp, the living room currently reeked of curry.

"…Ah, I ate so much~…"

"Looks like I did too…"

By the time he realized it, there were two cleared plates sitting in front of him---horrifyingly, the deliciousness of the slightly fermented curry was already beyond the limits of refined taste.

Taking the dishes to the kitchen, he quickly washed them and picking up a glass of barley tea to bring with him, he returned to the living room to find,

"Hey…Don't sleep there, okay?"

The belly-stuffed tiger stretched languidly out on the sofa. Wiggling her bare toes, she opened her mouth wide and yawned,

"Hah…I'm not sleeping. Didn't I tell you we were going to discuss our plans for tomorrow? I'm just feeling …a bit tense…and tired... that's all. Even though it's only been one day."

"…You know, you do look really sleepy…"

Every single time in the past, Taiga had followed the same rapid descent into the lifestyle of a cow that involved stuffing herself, lying down, then promptly falling asleep; so Ryūji, who had constantly witnessed her three-step combo, didn't find her declaration of "I'm not sleeping" very convincing. And yet, every time she pulled that move, he ended up on the floor himself, drooling away. Whenever he saw the sleeping Taiga's happily vapid expression, it seemed like his body would immediately weaken. It was almost as if her body radiated some sort of aura that could hypnotize people into falling asleep with her.

"…If you sleep in a place like this, just think about what Kawashima will say…"

"…The stupid Chihuahua…?"

"Yeah…"

"…"

…Sitting on the floor, leaning against the sofa that Taiga was stretched out on, and resting in a position where his forehead was close to Taiga's stomach, his head was warming up and his vision was blurring…it happened all of a sudden…

"…Are you asleep?"

Pulling himself upright, Ryūji shook himself awake. *Not good, at this rate I'll end up falling asleep myself.*

"Taiga, don't sleep. Sit up properly."

"…"

"Hey."

Placing his hand behind her head, he pulled her outstretched form into an upright position. Limp as she was, Taiga started to ball up,

"It's cold…so cold…"

"Ahhh, that tickles! Hey, cut it out…!"

As Ryūji sat on the sofa with one knee up trying to awaken Taiga, she pressed her head against his thigh below his knee, kind of like a nuzzling cat. But,

"…!"

Very suddenly, she jumped up in surprise. Her eyes that were nearly closed immediately opened wide.

"That was your crotch…!"

"You were moving all on your own!"

Nooooo~~…With her glaring at him distastefully like that, Ryūji might very well have enjoyed smacking her on the head.

"Geez…Well, now I'm wide awake…I wish I could peel off my face, disinfect it, and then put it back on."

Yawning once again even while claiming she was wide awake, Taiga finally sat up properly next to Ryūji on the sofa. And then, when she decided to say something,

"Anyway, there's at least one thing I'm sure of…Trips are tiring."

"What a thing to say now."

Defenselessly raising her arms to stretch, Taiga looked up to the ceiling,

"I guess, the whole thing's been kind of stressful…I thought that I'd be happier, being with Kitamura from morning until night, but…it seems like I'm a lot more nervous than happy."

"Well, I can see what you mean…He even showed up naked all of a sudden after all."

"…Don't you feel the same? It's not like Minorin showed up in the nude, but you're still tired, right?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

Though he couldn't tell Taiga about it, that peaceful time between the two of them had been nice enough, but--it's not like it hadn't worn him out. With all the sudden stress he put his heart through today, he wondered how many years he'd shaved off his life.

"…You know, I had imagined that being married would be something really pleasant, but actually, it must be rough…It would be just you and your loved one, two people alone together a lot of the time, right?…I feel like I'd die young if it was like that constantly."

Taiga unwound her braided hair, making it gently jump in the darkness. Then playing with the ends of her hair, she untangled it in the dark by running her fair hands down between the strands again and again. Quietly, "Now I see why Mom and Dad got divorced," she added. Right now Taiga was defenseless, so much so that her still painful scars were out in the open.

Suddenly looking at Ryūji, who was listening without saying a word, Taiga gave a small haughty laugh.

"And to think, when I'm with you, it's not a problem at all though…It looks like I've already been infected by that cramped 2DK residence."

"…How rude. What the heck are you saying?"

"Just look. Even though we're in such a large room, don't you think we look foolish? It feels like a normal six-tatami room, with the way we're sticking so close like this."

"Ah…I see. The feel of a six-tatami room, huh."

Listening to what Taiga said, Ryūji somehow understood. It made sense now that she'd said it. It wasn't like there was only one sofa, and if they wanted to talk, they could have sat at the table; but instead, they were sloppily huddling together like this without even extending their legs and talking with almost zero distance between them. Even though their bare ankles were touching, he had only realized it just now.

However, Taiga didn't show any sign of being particularly bothered by the situation, as she didn't say "Get off!" or "Get away!" or anything of that sort. Well, it was late at night after all, so it was really the best distance for chatting quietly. And it's not like Ryūji felt any great desire to pull away either.

"…Well, being with the one you like really is fun. It's just, these are extraordinary circumstances. I don't think I'd be able to stand it either if it was like this every day."

"Mhm…achoo~"

Giving a small sneeze, Taiga leaned forward. When he reached out to hold a tissue in her face for her, she remained sitting like that and heartily blew her nose.

Next thing they knew, the two of them were only some ten centimeters apart. Their feet touching, nothing but the sound of the waves echoed in the night. When a pubescent pair, a young boy and girl were in such a situation, it would be only normal to expect something more to happen, but---

"I need another tissue. I'm not done yet."

"Oh, must be quite a bit."

"It's a cold."

Looking at Taiga's profile, which nevertheless formed an elegant outline even while she was blowing her nose, Ryūji felt strangely at ease. He was finally able to take a break from the noisy and unfamiliar surroundings; it was almost as if he were back at home. This was in spite of the fact that as a pretty girl and, more importantly, as the Palmtop Tiger, Taiga was an exotic creature who for all intents and purposes should have been far removed from the realm of "restful".

"…Nnh…Or maybe I have allergies…"

"Did you bring any cold medicine?"

"No…Ooh~, if Kitamura sees me with my nose running…"

While they were speaking back and forth in short bursts, Ryūji unthinkingly started yawning as well. Covering his open mouth with the palm of his hand, he started drifting in thought.

As long as he was with Taiga like this, it didn't really seem to matter whether they were in a celebrity's mansion or the second floor of his rented house. To put it another way, they ended up bringing about the same familiar atmosphere. He could almost imagine that Inko-chan's cage was right nearby or that Yasuko was on her way home while staggering drunk. Just listen now, " m'ack" he could hear her speak in her sweet slurred speech as her high heels clattered with drunken footsteps . Being together with Taiga, that was the atmosphere he felt.

He thought it was rather strange, but it definitely wasn 't a bad sensation. Actually, you could even say that she brought a feeling of security, kind of like a good luck charm---Though he said 'security', Taiga was still a fierce individual of course.

While he was wondering what Taiga herself was thinking, she rubbed her eyes somewhat sleepily,

"Hey Ryūji. You know, I thought…just now, about that dream…might not be so…"

"Hm? Are you talking about the warning dream?"

As soon as he turned around to face her, Taiga clammed up. Then, averting her gaze slightly,

"…Actually, umm. Never mind about that…More importantly, what should we do for tomorrow? Another Bakachi type would just be falling into a set pattern."

For some reason, he worried a bit about what she had been trying to say, but they still had to come up with plans for tomorrow. Once again pulling himself upright, Ryūji corrected his posture and started thinking.

"Ah, you're right…Didn't she say she wanted to go play in the sea or something tomorrow?"

"The sea's bright and cheery; plus there's no place to hide, so there's really not much we can do."

"Seems like it…I wonder what we should do…"

"Things that would scare Minorin…"

They had both tilted their heads at the same angle, thinking, when,

"---What do you mean by, things that would scare Kushieda?"

The sudden interjecting voice echoed in the dark.

Without saying a word, the two of them practically leaped, tumbling from the sofa onto the rug. Spooked, they huddled down at the foot of the sofa, trying to somehow hide themselves,

"Wh, what the heck was that?"

"Eek~…!"

"Ahh~…!"

They were caught firmly by the shoulder. They were practically yanked up. The glasses-clad face staring them down was---the nudist, Kitamura. It was too late to escape.

"You guys…If you came down here because you were thirsty, what are you doing scheming?...It smells like curry in here."

"W, we're not scheming anything…"

"Well then, what about making Kushieda freak out like that today? That offense must have been entirely your doing, right?

As he was perfectly correct, both Ryūji or Taiga were at a loss for words. Feeling awkward and agitated, they looked at one another with stiff expressions, unable to explain. Their silence was, of course, no different from an outright confession of "Yes, we were the ones who did it ",

"…Geez…"

Adjusting his glasses, Kitamura sighed in near disbelief.

"Why in the world did you do it…Don't you have any sympathy for Kushieda?"

As might be expected, his tone carried the strictness of a class representative. Feeling chastised, Ryūji unconsciously took to the proper kneeling form next to the sofa with both hands on his knees and was desperately trying to figure out what to say,

"Th, that's…This is Minorin's present, that's right."

Taiga, who was sitting next to him in exactly the same position, started making up an excuse in desperation.

"Her present?"

"Yeah. Even though it might not seem like it, Minorin actually loves horror even more than eating three square meals a day…I'm saying this as her friend, so there's no mistake about it. Being surprised like that and acting scared is her favorite thing in the world. So, I'm scaring her and letting her make some nice summer memories…"

Just as soon as he thought to himself 'Who in the world would actually fall for that story?',

"Oh!"

He got his answer.

That is, it was this guy standing before him, the one smacking his hands together as his glasses glinted.

"I see~, so it was like that now was it? No wonder her eyes shimmered rather ravenously considering she was supposed to be scared."

That was probably Kitamura's imagination, but if that' s what he thought, then it worked out in their favor. Vigorously nodding in agreement, both Ryūji and Taiga sincerely hoped that Kitamura would just accept the idea of 'see nothing, say nothing, hear nothing' and let them go, but,

"All right, I get it. If that's the case, then let me help out too."

Are we screwed?---Ryūji thought to himself in despair.

"If we all work together, then tomorrow we'll really be able to surprise her, won't we?"

Exchanging a look, Ryūji and Taiga asked each other " What now? What do we do?", but regardless of their worries or cursing, Kitamura was way too into it already. Then he seemed to think of something,

"That's right, let's call Ami too."

"Eh?!"

"Bakachi too?!"

"Yeah. After all, she knows this place rather well, and besides, think about it. Ami would definitely love doing this sort of thing, that's for sure. And she'd pout if she was the only one left out of all this. I'll go get her right now."

They didn't have enough time to think of a way to stop him, so Kitamura ended up going upstairs to fetch Ami. As soon as his back escaped their sight, the two of them collapsed, leaning against one another,

"Wh, what the heck do we do about this Taiga?! We're getting further and further away from the original plan!"

"There's nothing we can do to change this, so asking that now is useless! If it's going to be like this, we'll just have to follow along."

"Even if you say to just go along with it---"

[Everyone made sure to scare her], [Minori was frightened], [Ryūji, the knight, appeared], [Everyone was in on it together], [The fearful Minori got angry], [But, Takasu and Aisaka said…]…*If that's how things go, is there any reason to believe that it would somehow bring them drastically closer together? Causing fear and spreading lies, wouldn't that only serve to make her despise me? Additionally, that Ami's bound to join in on the whole thing. If it's her, she' ll get a kick out of it, or else, to continue in her provocations towards Taiga, she might even go and wreck everything.*

However, licking her lips, Taiga seemed to have made up her mind as she stared into the darkness.

"There's no helping it…Since it's come to this, we'll just have to revise our plans. You, just make sure to protect Minorin for now. Then, after everything's out in the open, tell her this: "I told them to stop. I was worried, so I was trying to protect you".

"Th, that…Do you honestly think she'd buy that?! How the heck's that supposed to work?!"

"You'll have to make it work! We don't have anything else!...You don't want it either, right? That dog-filled future!"

In the dark, Taiga's eyes glowed. Before Ryūji could even nod, they heard Ami cry out "I'm sleeeepy!" in an irritated voice followed by two people's footsteps making their way towards the living room.

---Are…you guys stupid? Don't you have anything better to do? I'm so sleepy…Geez.

Is what Ami said immediately after being dragged downstairs by Kitamura.

She had already given up the cutesy act, and because she was tired and in a bad mood, her true ill-tempered nature was unfortunately obvious,

"Now now, you don't need to say all that."

"Don't touch me, you pest!"

When her childhood friend attempted to console her with a pat on the back, she pushed him back with a cold glare. Despite the way Ami was acting, Taiga pulled up close to her,

"Hey Bakachi."

"…What?"

"If you help out, I'll let you play with your dear Ryūji for three days and nights."

Taiga grabbed Ryūji's face with both hands and pulled it right in front of Ami. "Why are you making me do this ?", Ryūji's eyes seemed to ask critically of Taiga as he turned to look at her, but,

"…If you don't, then she's going to blab about everything to Minorin."

Hearing her quick and quiet words of discretion, he had nothing he could say. After all, she was almost certainly right.

"Look Bakachi, if you prefer, I'll even give you the nude version."

"Ah~"

Right in front of Ami, Taiga boldly lifted up Ryūji's T-shirt, revealing his sexy black nipples, but,

"…Do not want."

Pushed aside roughly by Ami, who had looked away, Ryūji collapsed onto the sofa. Somehow, this hurt his feelings quite a bit. Taiga on the other hand wasn't discouraged in the slightest,

"No no no, Bakachi has to join us; I really want to do this with her! Hey hey, let's do it, let's do it together!"

"Au, au, au, au…"

Nuzzling like a cat against Ami's stomach as she sat cross-legged on the sofa, Taiga stuck to her and swayed her. While Ami's eyes were still half-closed with want of sleep, she didn't seem to even have the strength left to stop it and continued to be shaken against her will. Then even while rocking her back and forth and seeming to

fawn on Ami as treating her like a child, every once in a while,

"…150 continuous sessions of monomane…"

"Wha~…"

Taiga would look up and pepper in some whispered threats. Before long, Ami's eyes were all the way open.

"Hey hey yeah!...Humiliation…Let's do it, let's do it!... Leak it onto the net…Yeah yeah!…You'll never hear the end of it…"

As expected, Ami seemed to be wide awake now, and right after she grasped Taiga's head and yanked her off,

"Okay already! I get it! I said I understand, geez!...And I get motion sickness really easily, so cut it out already…"

Roughly ruffling her head in irritation, she glared at Taiga and Kitamura. She took a moment to glare at Ryūji as well.

"…So, you're scaring Minori-chan to entertain her… Why does Ami-chan have to do something like that now

…Ah geez, how annoying…Hey Yūsaku, get me something to write on."

After making use of her childhood friend, Ami took a ballpoint pen and started sketching what looked like a map onto a piece of paper.

"…Right here is the villa we're in currently. Over here is the cove that you saw when we were at the beach."

"…What horrible handwriting…"

After glaring somewhat gloomily at Taiga who had muttered that, Ami started again.

"Here, the rock wall rises straight up, and there's a cave you can get into. Two, maybe three people at most would be able to walk side by side in it…Well, it eventually widens out, but the light doesn't reach all the way in and the footing isn't very good, especially since the water from the sea pours in, so if you were doing a test of courage with a pocket flashlight…It would be quite easy to scare someone there, don't you think?"

Ohh…In the dimly lit living room, there was a quiet round of applause.

"As expected of Ami, she's one of the locals."

"When it comes to scheming, I guess there's no one who can match up to Kawashima."

"…Don't call me a 'local', it feels like you're badmouthing me or something…"

Grasping her shoulder as Ami glared at the guys,

"Well done! If you come to my house, I'll let you do something with our pet parrot!"

Taiga patted her on the back.

"Hey you, when you say 'my', you're actually talking about my house and my pet…"

"…What exactly do you mean by 'something' Aisaka…?"

"…Ah, are you talking about that ugly parrot? I don't want to have anything to do with that thing…"

While scrunching up her face in annoyance, for just an instant Ami stared at Ryūji's face. She had the eyes of someone thinking about something totally unrelated to

what her surrounding friends were going on about---Just like a girl who wasn't really familiar with this sort of ordinary setting.

* * *

After discussing the plans about the cave and the test of courage for nearly an hour, Ami and Kitamura had each gone back to their respective rooms. As for Ryūji and Taiga,

"…Geez you, you should at least be able to go to the toilet on your own…"

"But, it's dark."

Forced to escort Taiga to the bathroom, he went up the stairs just behind her. Afterwards, parting in front of Ryūji's room, Ryūji went inside his dark bedroom alone.

"…Well then, guess I'll sleep…"

Just like the sound of the waves, the drowsiness was washing in and out. Pulling up the sheets that were already devoid of all previous warmth, he had just laid himself down on the bed once again, but---then,

"!...What the heck!"

Forgetting to keep his voice down, he jumped up. After he had happened to touch the pillow, he felt something tangle up in his hand. It was thin, long, and like thread…And also, it seemed, kind of slimy?

In any case, he tried turning on the light, and once the light reached his eyes that had gotten accustomed to the dark,

"Ugh…"

Unnerved, he reflexively tensed.

Numerous strands of long hair were sticking to the travel towel that he had laid out on his pillow. It's not like they were everywhere, but it looked as if some woman had been sleeping there, leaving quite a few of them behind. And then when he looked at his hand that had touched the pillow, there were…some slick strands hanging from it. Feeling physically ill, he was nearly overcome by an urge to vomit. Practically leaping away from the bed, he took out a tissue and started scrubbing at his hand.

Clearly, the hair was too long to be Ryūji's. Also, they hadn't been there when he had gotten out of bed earlier---Well, when he had woken up earlier, he hadn't actually turned on the light though.

So then, just when did they appear?

Of course no one was there to answer his stream of questions for him, and so with the feeling of unease at his back, Ryūji involuntarily held his breath. There was the sound of the waves outside his window…The sound of the wind… …Well, this wasn't a big deal. It really wasn't anything to worry about at all. It must have been there to begin with. I must have accidentally brought along one of Yasuko's towels by mistake. It's Yasuko's hair. This

sliminess…must be, my drool, or something. There's no other reasonable explanation.

Pretending to remain calm, Ryūji started backing out of his room carefully. Just maybe, the hair could have come from Taiga. He had no idea how she could have done it, but it was still possible that Taiga was behind this somehow. *It's really not a big deal*, he kept telling himself over and over as he walked out quickly, practically running. He ended up in front of Taiga's room, which was right next to his. Without even knocking, he opened up the door,

"Ta, Taiga, in my room, did you…huh…?"

"Ryūji…"

The lights were on in the room, and Taiga was standing. She hadn't even gone to bed.

"Hey, do you…know anything about this…?"

Nonchalantly hiding behind Ryūji's back, Taiga was pointing at one of her one-piece dresses that had been tossed aside on the floor unfolded.

"…Aren't those the clothes you changed out of? I keep telling you to hang them properly."

"That's not it…Those, I haven't worn them yet. I planned on wearing them tomorrow and they were supposed to be folded and inside my bag…"

"…C, couldn't you be mistaken…?"

"…That's what I thought too, but when I went to pick them up…they were warm. As if someone had just taken them off…So then…that…"

Taiga grabbed onto the end of Ryūji's t-shirt with a tight grip. Feeling like his heart was in a vice, Ryūji couldn't move even a single step. On the floor around the discarded dress, wet-looking footsteps had been left behind. And, rather than water, it was a viscous fluid that made up the footprints.

"I, in my room, there's something weird going on too …It's like, someone already, slept in my bed…And they left behind slime on my pillow…"

"…"

A silence descended upon the room. Like a basso continuo, only the repeating sound of the undulating waves carried on---

"Eek!"

Suddenly, the window jolted.

It was probably just the wind, he had thought, but then Taiga crumpled. Even forgetting to lend her a hand, Ryūji became unresponsive.

I feel it---A presence. Some sort of presence. Like a cat that would turn around to stare at seemingly empty space, Taiga looked all about nervously, desperately clinging to the wall for support,

"N, no way…This is…really weird…L, let's go to someone else's room…"

She grabbed and pulled at Ryūji's arm. And then, she tried to head to the hallway through the still open doorway, but 'Bam!', the door was closed from the outside.

"…!"

Taiga collapsed. Even Ryūji who was watching felt his lower body give out, and he couldn't stand anymore. Crawling to be near one another, the two of them huddled near the wall,

"Th, th, thi, this is, a dream, right?! That's gotta be it, a dream, right Ryūji!"

"Yeah, this must be a dream; after that dream with the puppies and the doghouse, this must be a continuation!"

"If we just close our eyes, we'll wake up any second!"

"Let's wake up!"

---They desperately closed their eyes. They felt that something really weird would happen if they opened their eyes as their bodies continued to tremble uncontrollably.

Chapter 5

"...So tired..."

"...Mhm..."

In the kitchen lit by the morning sun, a pair of shadows (one small and one large) sat at the dining table across from one another, staring gloomily at the bag of bread on the table.

They had planned to make sandwiches, intending to take care of both breakfast and lunch. They had even made sure the others had bought ham and lettuce.

However, Ryūji wasn't even lifting a finger, and his eyes were three times as horrible as usual, blood-shot from lack of sleep. Similarly, with her hair unkempt, her face unwashed, and having just barely managed to change clothes, Taiga was just sitting in her chair staring blankly out the window.

Getting to the point, the two of them were severely sleep-deprived. They were really, really sleepy.

Last night, they eventually couldn't stand being in that room any longer, and so hand in hand, they had lightly

dashed out with their footsteps in unison, once again making their way downstairs. Turning on the light and the TV, "There's no way I'm sleeping tonight!", "It can't hurt to skip just one night of sleep, so let's pull an all-nighter!", and so on they had said to one another while watching the 6 o'clock news.

"Shall we go walk on the beach?", he remembered suggesting to Taiga. He even remembered that she had nodded, saying "That sounds good". But before they knew it, the two of them had ended up collapsing at the table, falling into a fragmented slumber. He only awoke just now because he had rested his head on his hands and they had gone numb. It was already 7 am as he tried to awaken Taiga who was sitting beside him in the same position.

Beyond the window, the beach in the morning was invigoratingly bright. Beneath the beautifully clear sky, the waves were gently lapping at the beach today as well , and the repetitive sound of the water itself seemed to have a cleansing effect. It would probably be the perfect time to go walking on the sandy beach, maybe even bringing along a golden retriever.

However, rather than anything even remotely as fine as a retriever, only a mongrel and a tiger, who were both sleep-deprived, continued staring dumbly at one another .

Rubbing at his eyes roughly, Ryūji called out "He~y, he~~y" to Taiga in a voice that sounded like some old senile geezer.

"I'm sleepy after all... Forget breakfast, I'm going back to my room to sleep..."

"Nn~", Taiga mumbled, sounding as if she too were growing dull as she lifted her face.

"...Don't go...Because, I'm pretty sure, you'll end up sleeping until noon..."

"Maybe...You're probably right..."

He tilted his head. His stiff shoulders made a sound that shouldn't have come from a seventeen year-old boy. It was probably because he had slept in a weird position that his joints were all stiff, but despite how brief it was,

his short nap still counteracted the stupefying effect of sleep deprivation, helping him to remember things and shuffle his brain back into order.

So then here's what he was thinking. About yesterday, there must have been some sort of mistake, some sort of misunderstanding, probably at least. There was no reason to feel so scared like that---He really should have just slept in his bed anyway.

Surely, the towel must have been one he had forgotten to wash and brought along anyway with strands of hair from either Yasuko or Taiga stuck to it all along, and concerning Taiga's clothes, she probably pulled them out herself when rummaging around in her bag after her bath and must have just forgotten. That sort of explanation made total sense. The wetness must have been drool...or maybe sweat from Taiga's feet.

Yawning and giving a good stretch, Ryūji gathered his strength and stood up.

"Ok now, let's make them, those sandwiches. Let's use a bit of the leftover curry and make curry potage."

"Potage?... That sounds yummy..."

Then, somehow mustering the strength, Ryūji finally opened the bag of bread while Taiga looked on. With an angry look in his eyes, he...stared at the bread. It wasn't like he felt some sort of perverted lust towards the bread, but that he had his dried eyes dumbly fixated on...hey, wait.

"...What the heck am I doing, just staring down the bread like this. I have to get the ingredients together."

Apparently, his mind was still a bit fuzzy.

"Ingredients?"

"That's right... Boiled and chopped eggs mixed with mayo, and there should also be a can of tuna, right? Then , the lettuce, tomato, and ham... Hey you, help out with something. What are you going to do to assist me?"

"I'll cheer you on from over here."

'This girl', he was glaring intensely at Taiga's fair face with his bloodshot eyes when,

Pitter-patter, came the sound of light footsteps coming down the hallway,

"Hm? Huh? So you guys are up already! Morning Taiga!"

The one who suddenly appeared was Minori.

Standing amidst the dazzling white light and possibly having just washed her face, her bangs were pulled up with a turban to completely reveal her smooth forehead, and so while smelling pleasantly of facial cleansing foam, Minori pressed Taiga's nose upwards like a pig's. Then,

"Hey now Takasu-kun! Are you already trying to get breakfast ready for us? I woke up thinking I'd make breakfast since you made dinner for us last night, but it looks like I'm too late!"

In her sleepwear that merely consisted of a t-shirt and shorts, she was all smiles even early in the morning,

"Ahh, it's so nice out today!"

She faced Ryūji, greeting him as she energetically formed a splendidly even Y. However,

"Y...yeah."

Even just holding up the bag of bread was taking all of Ryūji's strength. Seeing her so suddenly first thing in the morning, Minori was simply too dazzling of a presence for Ryūji to bear.

"Huh? Somehow, you two don't look so hot, you know ? Trouble sleeping?"

"Ah, yeah... Well, pretty much..."

"We stayed up the whole night, watching television..."

"Eh, what a thing to do! Will you be ok? Are you feeling sick?"

Shake shake, Taiga responded with a few twists of her head. Taking the opportunity to nuzzle up against Minori, she seemed to have entered something of a ' pampered mode'. *I want to do that too*, Ryūji thought, unable to do anything but watch their display with an envious look.

Emphatically rubbing Taiga's back while going "There there now", Minori affectionately smacked her just above her rear end and looked up, as if she had thought of something.

"You two should go and take showers, don't you think ? I bet you'll feel at least a bit better afterward. It seems like Ami-chan and Kitamura-kun are still sleeping anyway."

Despite going "Ehh" and shrugging at first as if she couldn't be bothered with following that proposal, Taiga suddenly stopped. Then turning around, she met Ryūji's gaze for just a moment with mysteriously calm eyes,

"...Actually, I think I will take a shower. Minorin, lend me your towel."

"This one? It's a face towel, you know? Plus, I've already used it."

"That's fine. Help Ryūji in my place if you don't mind."

"Takasu, are you okay with Taiga going first?"

As Ryūji sputtered "Eh, well I", Taiga cut in with a " Hmph",

"Ryūji will leave behind hair and sweat and stuff, so no way!"

She refused sharply---*What am I, some stray dog that hasn't been washed in half a year or something?* However, without hearing even a single objection, Taiga took the towel from Minori's neck and then quickly left the kitchen. *It's not even like she's the type who'd recover just by taking a shower in the morning*, Ryūji thought as he watched her go,

"Well then I, Kushieda, will take Taiga's place and help tons!"

I see, he suddenly realized. So that he could spend some time together alone with Minori, that's why Taiga had left like that... That she could occasionally do a good job like this, it seems like she's not one to be trifled with.

"Hmm, so what's going on? What are we doing? What should I be doing now?"

Smiling with her eyes like crescents, Minori was staring at Ryūji's hands. Suddenly, the sweet scent of Minori's hair wafted into Ryūji's nose, making his hands tremble.

"W...well then... I'll handle boiling the eggs, so can you slice up the onions?"

"Roger. What am I making it for?"

"Sandwiches."

"Oh, doicchi, how nice!"

While seemingly unaware of Ryūji's nervousness, "I hate English more than anything else, y'know" Minori muttered (in imitation of one of their classmates from 2-C , Doi-kun, whose nickname was Doicchi), then immediately washing her hands and grabbing an onion, she quickly removed the top and the root with a knife. She then peeled the skin and neatly tossed it in the trash, and started humming while slicing away,

"...You, really have great technique..."

Ryūji couldn't help but think. Watching Minori rhythmically chop-chop-chopping away with the kitchen knife, it was the first time he'd seen anyone his age who could work in the kitchen as well as this. The uniform slices of onion she cut were so splendidly thin, they were even transparent. Of course, it couldn't compare to Ryūji's own godly technique.

"Eh, did you compliment me just now? Woohoo, go me!"

"Just like your skill at cleaning up yesterday, you're quite proficient at this, huh. Is this also from your part-time jobs?"

"Well, it's been a while since I'd say that I couldn't cook . Because after all, my parents work and I've got a younger brother who eats a lot~"

"Younger brother? I never knew..."

"I'm a hard-working ballplayer. Fuhaha! Just look, the onions are so thin, like see-through lingerie!"

Not taking her eyes off the knife, Minori smiled brightly. Although smiling,

"Uh-oh, it got in~...my, my eyes~"

She was crying heavy tears. Even the redness of her sniffling nose could be considered cute,

"...Oh...I need to rinse the lettuce..."

Ryūji was having serious trouble seeing straight. With Minori really and truly standing right next to him, he was simply more happy and embarrassed than he could

stand. While it may not have been obvious to an outside observer, Ryūji was fidgeting quite a bit even as he chopped the lettuce. He went from chopping to rinsing. Taking care not to use too much water, he made sure to keep the water in a clean washbucket. He tossed in some ice. Finally, he wiped at the moisture around the sink with one hand. With his remaining he hand, he checked on the heat for the eggs.

"Well, really, it should be me saying that Takasu-kun is truly good at cooking. I only found out because I heard it from Taiga, but I was really touched. Yesterday's curry was really delicious, and then even our slicing speeds are different. To begin with, there really aren't a lot of high school boys who would mention anything like needing to put the lettuce in water. Mm, I'm impressed."

"I, is that right?... But that sort of thing isn't a big deal... "

If you wanted, I'd even show you my technique to use cucumbers, carrots, and radishes as decoration... Ryūji could make a phoenix out of vegetables.

"That's not true, you're really something. I think it's really wonderful how Takasu-kun can do this sort of

thing so well... Fufu, I bet none of the other girls in our class know anything about this part of Takasu-kun, right ? It's just Taiga and me, plus Ami-chan. I wonder how I should put it? It makes me feel, kind of superior."

While cheering silently in his heart, Ryūji merely shrugged. What she said was a bit much. Or else, it seemed like she might have been trying to kill him through anxiety.

"I'm sure that the girl who becomes Takasu-kun's wife will be really happy."

---That was the knockout blow.

"What are you saying now, really", Ryūji merely said as he was opening the can of tuna and watching the fire for boiling the eggs. However, on the inside, he was already long gone.

"Kyu...Kyushieda~!"

"What is it Takyasu-kyun?!"

Frantically taking her response, going "Wait, what?" for a moment and getting distracted and embarrassed, he was even more disturbed than before. And so, possibly against better judgment,

"I, it's about yesterday!"

He ended up saying. He wasn't even sure himself what it is he wanted to say. Of course, unable to follow up with anything, Ryūji clammed up in his confusion. *What to do, what to do, this silence is killing me... What should I do?*

However, next to the paling Ryūji, Minori dropped the thin onion slices into the water to soak along with the lettuce,

"Takasu-kun, it's about just that,"

She took over the conversation in his stead. With a flick of her dark eyes, she sharply stared at Ryūji's face and placed her index finger on her lips. Then, going " Shhh" and lowering her voice,

"...That whole thing, no one else knows. I haven't told anyone else about it. It was...well, I guess you could say... I messed up. It was a slip of the tongue, really."

Her expression softened into a smile.

"But even if it just slipped out, I'm glad that it was Takasu-kun whom I told... Thanks for listening to me."

"...Kushieda..."

Without meaning to, their gazes met suddenly while they were right next to each other. It felt like there was definitely something else behind Minori's smiling expression, as if time had stopped as---

"Ah, uwawawa~! The eggs!"

With a hiss, the pot boiled over. The hot water that spilled out extinguished the flame of the portable stove. Rushing over together, they flipped the switch and checked for the smell of gas,

"I wonder...if it's ok?"

"Yeah, it probably should be."

Wiping the stand with a towel, he suddenly noticed they were at point blank range from one another. "Uwah! ", Ryūji was just about to quickly retreat to open the distance when,

"Takyasu-kyun's being clumsy. How adorable."

Minori had suddenly said, bewitching him with a defenseless smile. "~----~", Ryūji went speechless, but he didn't want to be seen blushing furiously and instead, accepted the playful atmosphere,

"...Oh."

He went ahead and knocked Minori on the shoulder. It was the first time he'd ever done this to the girl he liked. "Fuhehe", Minori shook with laughter.

* * *

"…All right then, let's do this like we planned."

Kitamura quickly said, wearing only his swim trunks and a towel over his shoulder while walking briskly just a bit in front of them. Nodding along, Ryūji and Taiga had their hands full with a bunch of stuff. At a glance, it would seem to be such things as sandwiches and drinks and a variety of towels that they were taking to the beach . But in reality, the transparent bag contained things like flashlights and Ami's hand-drawn map, in addition to a variety of obscure tools meant for some unrevealed purpose.

In the living room of the villa where the sun had continued to shine down pleasantly all morning, Minori called out "Ah, wait, wait" as she finally arrived, wearing a sweatshirt and shorts made of some glossy material as well as a pair of open-toed sandals that had a flower attached. She quickly made her way over to Taiga's side, her hair that was up in a ponytail swishing side to side as she passed by Ryūji, wafting the pleasant scent of her sunscreen under his nose.

Likewise, Ryūji was wearing a t-shirt and some swim trunks so it wouldn't matter if he got wet either. By the way, he was wearing the t-shirt because he didn't want

to be compared to Kitamura's stylish physique. Then coming to Taiga, in addition to her swimsuit with the padded breasts, she was actually wearing an airy dress with a gingham check pattern of green and white. With the shoulder straps, her white back was clearly visible, but he still thought that she had on more than she needed. After all, it's not like she had any reason to be so self-conscious. Well, it could be she doesn't want to be compared to Ami in a swimsuit---

"…Huh? Actually, where is Kawashima?"

"Amin is upstairs putting on sunscreen. I told her we were going but she said to just go on ahead without her."

"Geez, she said she was going to bring a beach umbrella…She probably can't carry it by herself though. I'll go see what's up."

Having Minori and Taiga go on ahead, Ryūji hustled up the stairs by himself. Though they were 'going to the beach', it really only involved walking down from the wood deck, so it's not like leaving without her would pose a problem.

Thinking he could go ahead and take the beach umbrella out first, he looked around for it, but he couldn'

t find anything that even resembled an umbrella. Wondering if it might be in Ami's room, he knocked on her door,

"Hey, I'll carry the beach umbrella out for you. Where' s it at?"

He asked, and from the other side of the door came the response, "It's in here, so come in and get it~". Thinking ' What a sloth', he turned the knob and stepped in,

"It's over there."

"…W, what are you doing?"

"Enjoying the view."

He found a certain unpleasant narcissist (or maybe he should say 'idiot') standing in front of a full-length mirror in her swimsuit, laughing "Kukuku" with a satisfied smile as she shifted her hair up and down. Keeping as far away as possible so he wouldn't get involved with her, he was slowly making his way to his goal of the umbrella, but,

"So, what do you think of my swimsuit?"

Turning around suddenly, Ami the narcissist struck a pose while facing Ryūji. The denim bikini matched her fair skin well, clearly accentuating her splendidly slim figure.

"…It's fine, I guess."

"Eh? Is that all you've got to say?"

Saying "Is that all?", was she really asking him to say more? Well, Ryūji was thinking a variety of things besides just 'fine'. Like, for example, the alluringly curvy S-line that went from her chest to her rear, the beauty of her fair well-defined stomach that resembled a marble goddess statue, the possibility that she could become a top idol if she were to appear on the front page of one of those gravure magazines that lined bookshops nowadays , and that she was certainly beautiful enough that one couldn't speak without showing some measure of admiration---However, if he were to voice all that, it would be tantamount to sexual harassment.

"Mm, I went and showed up in a bikini during swim class, didn't I… So maybe it's kind of lost its fresh appeal now?"

Ami was talking to herself while making a troubled face and tilting her head,

"But this part separates, y'know?"

"Ah!"

With a tug, she undid the top part of her bikini top, a large ribbon strap that went around her neck. Seriously unnerved, he shrieked wondering 'It separates where now?', when in front of him, Ami's bust jiggled up and down as if poking fun at him,

"It's much better like this, don't you think~?"

It was styled like a tube top now, leaving much more skin exposed than before. Her milk-colored cleavage was apparent as she bent over looking into the mirror, and seemingly on the verge of spilling out, the soft-looking swells looked strained,

"Fix it, fix it!"

Feeling something akin to terror, he screamed.

"Why~?"

"Just do it!"

"Then…*you* do it

."

"No!"

Concisely protesting, he leaped towards the umbrella. *I'll just hurry up and take this out*, he thought, realizing that the atmosphere with just him and her alone had become somewhat dangerous. Even though he was fully aware that her angelic smile and moist Chihuahua eyes were simply a sham, it didn't change the risk factor involved. *Please, someone mark this girl's hips with the word "dangerous".*

"Geez Takasu-kun, it's because you're so cold~."

Pouting, Ami turned away with a 'puh'. However, for just an instant, her expression as she glanced at Ryūji stifled her rejecting, or rather, trying spitefulness, and so,

"…And I was being nice for a change too."

She said. *If that's what she considered 'nice', then I must be a saint*, Ryūji readily scoffed.

"Yes yes, thank you so~ much. Don't just wallow in your narcissistic fun; hurry up and get ready. Or else I'll leave you behind."

"Ehh? What's with that manner of speaking?"

If you don't like the way I'm speaking, why don't I show you the act as well. Humming lazily with a "Hm (note) hm (note)", Ryūji took up a spot in front of the mirror, and just like Ami was doing earlier, lifted his short hair up and down, stared at his face in the mirror, and spun around. Even he himself was disgusted by the display, but this was exactly what Ami had been doing. Just to drive it home,

"Hey Kawashima, what do you think of this swimming outfit? Does it look good?"

He lifted up his t-shirt to reveal his plain 4980 yen swim trunks. Ami's beautiful eyebrows quickly knitted together and her mouth stiffened as if to cry "Noooo~~!" with dread, her twitching angelic face revealing her sincere horror.

"So, tell me, you didn't like that, right? That was troubling, wasn't it? But, that was you."

"…Takasu-kun, you're starting to act like the Palmtop Tiger, you know?"

"Hey, I could take this off."

"Don't do it!"

Of course, although he was touching his front button, he had no intention of undoing it to begin with, so he stopped the act and quickly removed his hand. Showing her natural face, Ami glared at Ryūji with hazy-colored eyes and cynically pursed lips,

"…If this is how you're going to act, then I'm not going to help you out today."

She went for his weak spot. Of course by 'help out', she must be referring to the plan to scare Minori. Ryūji hastily turned around to face Ami,

"H, how can you say that?!"

"Uwah. You're acting as if I've betrayed you or something."

Guh, he couldn't say anything. On the other hand, he could see that Ami had regained her angelic composure, showing a pleased smile. So then,

"Okay now, I'll ask you seriously here…Takasu-kun, just why are you going this far to entertain Minori-chan?"

"…~"

"Come on, tell me why, hm? It shouldn't be so hard to answer, now should it?"

Blinking her large moist eyes, she pressed up against him. *I'm not letting you go until you answer*, she seemed to be saying. Try as he might to escape, she just kept pushing him. She probably already knew the answer---Maybe. Even though she probably knew, it seemed she wanted to hear it from Ryūji himself. So then, she had to be merely playing with him…That, it was certainly likely .

"Hey. Hey. Hey, I said! If you don't tell me, I'm not going to help out. You've got ten seconds. 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4,…Come on now, don't you care? Three~, two~, one~… Hey, are you really not going to answer~?"

"…"

Guh, he bit his lips, keeping his mouth shut. He couldn't say it. He didn't want to say it. It's not like he had any reason to reveal his heartfelt secrets to a volatile girl like Ami, and more importantly, he didn't want to just go and tell her his feelings after she played around with him like this and even tried to coerce him. It might be a worthless show of obstinacy, but he couldn't allow himself to become a spineless coward.

Ami's eyes narrowed. Looking as if she were glaring or maybe laughing, she stared up at Ryūji from point-blank range. Then,

"…Zero. Fine then, I'm out."

She suddenly pulled away, and Ryūji was finally free. Ami flipped her hair, turned on her heels, and quickly walked out of the room, leaving Ryūji to himself. He picked up the umbrella and quickly gave chase, but Ami didn't look back.

Blinding midsummer sunlight and oppressively stifling heat.

Ryūji spread out a leisure sheet and laid it down on top of the hot sand that threatened to burn skin on contact, and then putting up the beach umbrella, he settled it into place,

"Yahoo~~!"

The first thing Minori did was fling off her sandals before dashing off towards the blue sea. While kicking up sand in her wake, she stripped off and tossed aside her sweatshirt on the spot, running nonstop all the way to the beach where the white spray of the waves glittered in the sun,

"Hyup~"

She did an amazing round off. "Ohh!" Ryūji let slip, watching in astonishment as she followed through with quite a bit of vigor, springing up quite high. Upon landing, she fell into a sitting position in the water and was soon engulfed by a wave,

"…Ahahahaha~! It got in my eyes!"

As her face went in the water, she rubbed her eyes like a kid. And waving her hands at Taiga while yelling " Hurry over~!", Minori seemed just like a summertime goddess.

Unveiled when she had stripped off her sweatshirt earlier, a striped bikini!...was what she was wearing. Her skin, upon which a layer sunscreen helped repel droplets of water, reflected a dazzling brilliance all over, so within the transparent blue waters, Minori seemed to sparkle. Each time she gave a great wave of her hands beneath the blistering midsummer sun, her apparently hefty breasts inside of her stripe-patterned bra (wonder whether or not I can say this) would bounce nicely, completely sucking in Ryūji's attention. Concerned with her stomach area, she was wearing shorts to cover up, but really, her abs were quite taut and even her belly button was nice and vertical.

On the other hand, sitting on the same sheet next to Ryūji while being beckoned by the goddess, Taiga was gloomily moaning with a knitted brow. Curling up within her long dress while full of melancholy and remaining entirely within the shadow of the beach

umbrella, even her face was completely hidden with her long hair. What's with this disparity?

"What's the matter? Is your stomach hurting again? Come on, look, Kushieda is calling for you."

"Mm, but, but you know…"

She was worriedly rubbing through her dress, touching the area around her small chest.

"I keep thinking…What if the pads get pulled out by the waves or something…"

"…Stop that, it's indecent."

Pulling her hands away for her, Ryūji nodded appreciatively.

"That shouldn't be a problem this time. After that accident before, I made sure to sew it with a proper lining rather than the hook method."

"…B, but that's not all. I, I can't swim."

"You don't need to worry about that either. Everyone here knows about that. No one's going to ask you to do

any synchronized swimming with them or anything like that."

"…I've, never actually gone all the way into the sea before…"

"So there's that too huh…Wait, really?"

The squirming Taiga nodded while playing with the hem of her dress and her toes. Hiding within the shade of the umbrella, her entire body was emitting an aura that said, "I want to try going, but the sea is scary; I want to go, but wearing my swimsuit is embarrassing". Guess it can't be helped, Ryūji thought, pushing her in the back and out of the shadow,

"There's really nothing to worry about, so just go. Today will be your 'seawater baptism'. Here, put on some sunscreen."

"…Ooh~…What if I start to drown…?"

"Kushieda will save you."

"…Don't you think the waves are scary?"

"You're much stronger than they are, I'm sure of it."

As Taiga lifted both arms while nervously trembling and fidgeting, he pulled up her dress and removed it for her. Her pale skin seeming to blend in with the beach umbrella, her slender frame sporting a one-piece swimsuit patterned with scattering red blossoms---it was an XS-sized swimsuit that, the day before yesterday, they had spent so much time picking out at the station building at three o'clock, making a great fuss until she finally bought it. It matched quite well with the paleness of her skin, and from Ryūji's perspective, she definitely looked good in it.

So handing over the sunscreen, he made her lather it on, “Ok, put some on there, make sure you cover your neck, now look, you didn’t get your back, good, off you go then” he instructed her clearly. Fidgeting while looking for Kitamura to make sure he wasn’t looking her way (what's the point of her hesitating like this?), Taiga bundled her hair quickly and ran off towards the beach, making her way over to Minori,

“…So cold!”

Like someone accidentally dipping into an extremely hot bath, she quickly pulled back her foot that had been touched by a wave. She stared hatefully at the approaching waves. Of course, as Taiga was of the feline persuasion, it seemed she wouldn’t mix well with water …Although, tigers at least should be able to swim.

Coming to what Kitamura was doing, he was a bit off to the side with Ami, seemingly arguing with her about something. Ryūji could occasionally make out what they were saying over the sound of the waves,

“But, the plan calls for both you and me…”

“Eh~? Whatever, I don’t feel like doing it~.”

"If you're not there, how am I supposed to find my way, huh?"

"Didn't I already draw up a map for you? It's too troublesome~"

---The plan was, Taiga and Ryūji were supposed to keep Minori occupied while Kitamura and Ami headed to the cave to set up some surprising traps. However, just as it appeared, Ami was currently saying "I'm tired", "So annoying", "Don't wanna do it", and so on. It seemed that as far as Kitamura was concerned, she had no intention of acting the good girl.

"I'm going to go take a nap~. Sorry Yūsaku, but good luck doing it on your own. I'm taking a pass on this and you're not going to change my mind."

Cutting the conversation short at her convenience, Ami went back to the shade of the umbrella. Laying down elegantly on the sheet next to where Ryūji was sitting,

"Hmm, did you overhear~? No complaining now, since it was Takasu-kun's decision after all."

While her smile was flawlessly charming, she murmured with a sharply spiteful look in her eyes.

"…Perhaps if you were to say 'pretty please', I might give you a second chance to answer, maybe? No~~t, that's a complete lie. To begin with, it's not like I was that interested anyway."

"…"

Shall I break wind?

Well actually, it's not like he could do it on command though. Sighing while ignoring Ami and standing up, Ryūji met up halfway with Kitamura who was making his way over.

"There's no helping it with that girl, so I'll go with you."

"Geez, that Ami…It's okay, you just stay here Takasu. If it was Ami and I, we could make up an excuse like we're checking out the villa's breakers or something, or if it was just Ami, then we could say she's just off on her own, but if you and I went, it would look suspicious. I'll go by myself."

"…Will that really be okay?"

"The preparations have already been taken care of. Piece of cake…so then; hey! Kushieda~! Aisaka~!"

"Huh~?" Minori replied care-freely from the midst of the waves. She was holding onto the fidgeting Taiga's arm as they walked within the sea.

"I'm taking a crap~----~!"

At Kitamura's deeply uttered shout, Minori collapsed into the sea. Dragged along, Taiga also sank into the water. Wondering 'Is this really fine with you…?', Ryūji sighed somewhat, but it seemed like it was.

"Well then Takasu, I'll leave this up to you."

Kitamura gave a salute, then carrying the secret tools, he set off towards the villa. Pretending to go back, he was actually taking a roundabout path to the cove.

Crossing paths with Kitamura as he was on his way,

"Ahh, now my mouth is all salty…More importantly, what the heck Kitamura-kun?! After going nude and announcing you're going to the toilet, what would people think of you?"

"I'm tired…"

The wet Minori and Taiga were holding hands as they returned from the sea. However, all Taiga had done was dip herself into the water a little, and only for a moment.

"You just walked over there a second ago, so how can you be tired already?"

"…Anyone would be tired after being rolled by the waves for five rounds on the beach!"

Her cattish eyes were thoroughly red and bloodshot as she glared harshly at Ryūji, seeming as if fire would erupt from her gaze at any moment.

'Is that so…?', Ryūji fell silent as in front of him, Minori and Taiga chugged down the tea from the plastic bottles they had brought with them. Then, patting Ami

on the shoulder, Minori spoke, “Amin should come play too! Or wait, could you have a physical condition? Are you worn out?”

She worriedly stared at Ami’s pale profile.

“…No, I don't…I’ll go later~.”

Using only a little effort, Ami still put on the faintest of smiles as she gently refused Minori. While dribbling some of the tea down her chin (which was okay because she was in a swimsuit), Taiga stared at Ami’s face. Then as if she thought of something,

“…Bakachi, go swim.”

Placing a hand on her pale back, Taiga tried shaking her.

“Eh? Why should I when I don’t want to? I want to sleep.”

Of course, she immediately declined. However, that didn’t stop Taiga,

“Come on, entertain me like usual with your ridiculously stupid and lewd antics.”

"…Geez you…whatever. I don't even know. I'm not going to stoop to your level."

"…Well then, try eating this."

Pulling out a single sandwich with her still wet hand, Taiga pushed it against Ami's mouth. Even as she was being ignored, she pressed it against Ami's lips repeatedly,

"Geez, what the heck you?! You're so annoying!...Will you be satisfied if I just eat this?"

Ami stood up, and unhappily taking the sandwich from Taiga's small hands, she took a huge bite out of it as if in desperation. However,

"Ah. Amin, that…that's one I made special for myself …"

"Minorin seemed to enjoy eating them, so I was wondering how they taste."

"…Mngfh…Uguh…~"

Ami seemed to be in agony. Inside the sandwich she had dropped, there was the color of death…rather, the

pure yellow of mustard. Coughing violently, she gulped down some Oolong tea and tried to breathe normally again, and then taking Ryūji's arm as he held his breath,

"Ta…Takasu-kun…you…"

While bending over and getting back up, she had a firm hold on him. Then she dragged Ryūji over to the sandy beach,

"H, how can you blame it on me?! Don't get angry at me!"

"Quiet. Just shut up…That damned little tiger's disobedience…It's all Takasu-kun's fault! You're careless!"

And kicked him in a surprise attack. Somersaulting and collapsing into the sea, Ryūji was captured by the waves, sent rolling on the sand one round, two rounds, three rounds…In front of his eyes was the white foam of the waves, and he became completely disoriented as he grasped at the sand and stood up. The next target of Ami's ire was Minori,

"…Minori-chan, we have something really fun in store for you."

Smiling, Ami looked at Minori with a face like a devil's .

"Wha~t is it Amin~?"

"…Over at the cove, there's a really pretty cave, you see. It's a really wonderful place, so let's all go over there this afternoon, on an expedition you could say; we can go for a stroll, so how about it?"

"Eh~, that sounds fun! Let's go, let's go!"

She was truly a malicious fiend. Making such a face, in the end Ami was moving the plan forward, and then continuing on, she grabbed onto Taiga's arm,

"I know~, hey hey Aisaka-san, I'll swim for you. And I 'll teach you to swim."

"T, that's okay. It's fine, fine, fine…Fine I said! There's no need to do all that Bakachi~! No! N-O-, I said~! Ryūji, save me~!"

With a stiff expression on her face and dragging Taiga along, she trudged onwards to the beach, making her way to the open sea.

Farewell Taiga. Well, of course that's just a joke, seeing as no matter how far they went, the shallow beach would only be deep enough to reach Taiga's belly button.

* * *

After playing at the beach for a while, they returned to the villa and took turns taking a shower, changing into clean clothes before taking some time to eat the leftover sandwiches and potage. By that time, the sun had gone down enough to where it was more pleasant to go out.

Feeling that the mood wouldn't be right if they went when there was too much light, they had still taken their time getting ready,

"Ehh, over here!...is, it…?"

By now, they had probably walked along the beach for ten minutes since leaving the villa.

"That's right, this is it."

"…", Minori was at a loss for words, looking back and forth between Ami, who was looking over her shoulder with a faint smile on her face, and the entrance to the cave.

The cove gave way to a rocky area, and the rocks amidst the water continued up to the cliff from the mountains. Rather eerily, the pitch black cave at this time of day was like a gaping maw.

The entrance was about three meters high as well as about three meters wide. It continued on inside for an unknown distance, and additionally, there was even a sign reading "Danger!" hung up in front. Truthfully, the sign was merely something that Kitamura had put in place.

Peering in timidly, Minori was hugging herself while in a t-shirt,

"…W, wait, didn't you say we were going for a walk?.. .Isn't this more like, a dare or something? What with the atmosphere and all…right? Ehh, it says "danger". Ahaha …haha…I, I think I'll wait here…"

Acting nonchalant, she tried to turn on her heel. However, next to her,

"Hey now, what are you talking about?"

Kitamura firmly gripped her shoulder. Thoroughly tanned, he pulled her over and pushed against her back, laughing as he pressed her onwards towards the cave's entrance.

"Don't you think this place would be perfect for a walk? It'll be a great way to make memories for the end of summer."

"T, that's okay…It's just, you know…I, isn't this too eerie? Somehow, this place…I've got a bad feeling about it…And, I don't really need this sort of memory…Sorry, let's not do this, seriously. It says "Danger", right? So isn' t it dangerous?"

"I used to play here all the time when I was little, so it can't be too dangerous."

Ami responded immediately, and adding on in an almost accusing manner,

"Kushieda, if you say that sort of thing, something might actually happen, you know?"

Kitamura spoke determinedly without yet saying what 'something' meant as he looked intently at Minori. Her eyes twitched.

"It's not like you've never heard of such things, right? Like, if you call on Kokkuri-san, beings from the other side will appear, or what happened in Hundred Stories, or…"

"…Is that really the sort of thing you should be saying to someone who scares easily…?"

"Well, it'll be fine as long as you believe you're not really scared. There's really nothing to be afraid of anyway. Isn't this a good chance to see some of nature's creatures? We might even find some sort of organism that no one's ever seen."

"…I guess…it's fine as long as it's a normal creature…"

Ryūji and Taiga were a bit off to the side, sighing as they watched those two.

"I guess it's a good thing that we got Kitamura to be our accomplice, huh?"

"Acting all persuasive, he's so cool."

'Is that so?', Ryūji tilted his head, but he didn't have any medicine nor the water of Kusatsu for the glittery-eyed and smiling Taiga. In any case, it was a sure thing that Minori wouldn't be able to refuse Kitamura's invitation, and while it was unfortunate for Minori, after coming this far, they were going to go all out to scare her for sure. Ryūji's chance would only come afterwards, when he would protect the terrified Minori. Things had changed quite a bit from their initial plan, but now that it was like this, they simply had to see it to the end.

"Alright then, we, the Kitamura Expedition Team, shall set off! I'm Red, Takasu's Black, Kushieda's Blue, Aisaka's Pink, and Ami is also Black!"

I-, I'm pink?...Why am I Black?!...You're skin-colored, I guess…These were some of the things the others were saying, but Red ignored all of it.

"Does everyone have their flashlights!? Do you want to see the golden cobra?!"

Yes!, the members answered the first part while ignoring the latter half. Each of them turned on the flashlights they were holding, creating rather shaky beams of light that tried to penetrate the darkness of the cave's interior. Continuing on inside wide enough that an adult could easily pass through with their arms fully extended, there was a depression in the rock where the ocean water flowed like a river. Being so wide and tall, it seemed like it would be safe to enter, but it was quite dark and went on for some distance, which apparently unsettled Minori.

"Forward march!"

"Ooh~, it's so dark…Wait up, Kitamura-kun."

Minori followed hesitantly after him. Taiga and Ryūji set off after them as well,

"…Come on Kawashima. Let's go."

"…"

Finally, Ami followed as well. Yeah yeah, she sighed forcefully while scratching her head with apparent exasperation.

In the still chilly air, the sound of five people padding along the wet rocky surface in sandals resounded against the trickling of the stream of ocean water.

"…Ooh~…It's dark~, it's cramped~, it's scary~…"

Practically sobbing for no reason, Minori was peering around nervously as she walked.

Any second now they'd be where Kitamura said the first setup was, so Ryūji was glancing all about with sharp eyes. Simultaneously, he reached out with one hand and grabbed Taiga firmly by the strap of her dress. "So annoying!" and "Pervert!" Taiga clamored at first, but seeing as how she had tripped four times already and been saved by Ryūji each time, she held her tongue.

Even Taiga was looking rather meek, giving just a single glance back at Ryūji. Just a bit further---a bit further until they would find out what Kitamura said was 'the first obstacle…something that'll come flying, a sudden strike.'

Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to learn of exactly what it meant, but in any case, according to what

Kitamura said, it was a terrifying contraption of good conceptual design that required very little work to set up for maximum efficiency, or so he'd heard. With such a grandiose explanation, for some reason even Ryūji felt his heart quicken. Just what sort of amazing thing was in store for them? Would he even be able to protect Minori from it?

Just then Kitamura, who was walking at the forefront, casually threw a meaningful glance back at Ryūji. It seemed like things were about to start. As Ryūji nervously watched on, Kitamura kicked at some sort of string that was in a gap in the rocks without Minori noticing. As a result, something came down from up front, swinging like a pendulum, but it just grazed silently by Minori on the right side as she muttered "I've got a bad feeling, kind of…" while facing to the left. Next to Ryūji,

"Uwa~…"

It brushed lightly by Taiga's face, and then returning again,

"Ah~…"

Ami avoided getting hit by stepping back,

"…Ack~…"

Smacking Ryūji in the back of the head, it stopped.

It was a block of fried tofu, suspended by a thread. Kitamura was looking back with a subtly stiff expression. Also,

"Uwah~!...Ohh, what a surprise~! What the, if it isn't a sea cucumber!"

Clinging to the rock wall, there was a single sea cucumber. Minori was staring at it in shock.

"M…My face…"

There was a bit of grease on Taiga's face from where she was grazed by the tofu, and somehow it was shining well enough that it was distinguishable even in the dark. 'Too mean', Ryūji had been scowling at Kitamura, but when he noticed Taiga's situation, '…Pfft' he unintentionally laughed. This in spite of the fact he had the same oil all over the back of his head. In any case, he was of course stifled by an elbow to his liver, which left him on one knee, but Minori apparently didn't notice any of this.

The first trap…was a failure. ‘Oh yeah’, Ryūji was reminded of a certain something. While Kitamura got good grades, when it came right down to it, he was an undeniable fool. “That’s Maruo’s charm

.” “Maruo-kun is so lovable

." Visions of the girls from Kitamura's personal defense squad fluttered about in the darkness.

They were making their way deeper into the winding cavern when,

"Ohh~!"

Kitamura suddenly exclaimed. It was the signal that they were at the second stage. After the failure of the first , it didn't seem practical to stake much on this next attempt, but according to Kitamura, he had put a lot of work into this one. He called it "the drowned stranger". At Ryūji's side, the shiny-cheeked Taiga was bending forward. It seemed that at least she was expecting something from Kitamura's scheme.

At Kitamura's cry, Minori whirled around full of surprise.

"Eh, what is it?! Did something happen?! Was it a sea cucumber?!"

"No, nothing like that!"

Replying loudly and grabbing Minori's shoulder, Kitamura pushed her onwards. Naturally flustered, she desperately dug in with the heels of her sandals,

"No no no, wait a minute! Wait just a minute!"

However, Kitamura would have none of her objections as he mercilessly pointed his flashlight into the crevices of a rock just a bit ahead. Then speaking very clearly,

"Oh look, what in the world is that!"

"So noisy", Ami's disgruntled mutter echoed, and then ---a silence took over.

"…Huh? What? I don't see anything."

Ahh, Ryūji and Taiga were holding their heads. How come…ahh, enough already.

"Well, just look, there's something over there…you don't see it?"

"Hmm? I really don't. Ah, I know. How good is your eyesight? Maybe I should get glasses too, because

recently I haven't been able to see far very well. I got my eyes checked in spring, and they said my sight was 0.5."

"Eh?! Doesn't that make you legally near-sighted?"

"…Really? Maybe I am? Aww, that sucks…And here I was thinking I'd be fine like this since I wasn't having any real problems in class or anything.

"But it would become a problem during our games, wouldn't it? I think you should consider getting glasses or contacts."

Somehow, they had ended up talking about eyesight. Not even willing to come up with some sort of witty way to interrupt, Ryūji scratched his oil-smeared head. Not like it matters, but he had made sure to put the tofu from just before into his pocket (Ryūji always keeps some plastic bags on him).

Another unimportant matter, about the drowned body that Kitamura had made…it was merely an odd human-shaped object constructed from old tossed out fish using worn out sheets. And as one more pointless observation, it would have been better if he hadn't drawn a circle for the mouth. It looked like it was supposed to be used for some other purpose.

"Hey Taiga, what should we do? Kitamura is a hopeless idiot."

"Don't badmouth Kitamura. I'm sure he'll have something after this."

Whispering in secret, Taiga scowled while staring down Ryūji,

"Hmm, but you know, it's rather cool in this cave, don' t you think?"

Until she noticed Minori speaking so casually while completely ignoring the red writing on the wall, the third stage of [remaining blood spatters] that had been prepared with red paint,

"…So what do we do now…?"

She asked gloomily.

Ryūji sighed, unable to bring himself to even criticize Kitamura. He was simply exhausted---According to what Kitamura had said, "The plan is a three-stage attack to scare Kushieda! We'll make her scream with the first, faint with the second, then drive her to her limits with

the third! At least, that's the plan!". Unfortunately, neither Ami, who was supposed to help with the preparations, nor Ryūji had gone along to help him. And so, this cave expedition would come to an end with such a dull conclusion. Similarly, Ryūji's summer would end without any real progress.

He came to a stop as he started seriously contemplating what he should do when,

"Huh, what's the matter Takasu-kun? If you stand around like that, you'll get left behind---Ugyah!!"

Minori, who had stopped as well, let out a fearful scream that echoed in the darkness. It couldn't possibly be that…

"…S, sorry! Takasu-kun…Umm…You know, in a dark place like this, you really shouldn't shine your flashlight on your face from below…"

So that's all it was.

He was shocked to a standstill. What the heck. So in other words, his face was enough to qualify as horror all on its own…

"Kyakyakyakya~!"

At his side, Taiga was laughing boisterously as if she were some weird bird from hell being amused as it peered curiously at this world. Pointing at Ryūji, she had on a genuinely amused expression, was clutching her stomach, and repeatedly letting out a laugh.

"Ukyakyakya! Ryūji, you're…I mean…Kyakyakya~!"

"Geez you!...Oh!"

Just as he turned his back angrily on her, he lost his footing on the slick rocky surface.

"Wah, are you alright Takasu-kun?! You have to be careful!"

Minori even ran over to help him. Feeling as if his face was on fire, he waved off her extended hand while saying, "I'm fine, no need". And so, trying to get up quickly, he placed his hand onto the rock.

Squish.

"…!"

He felt, something wet. Something entwining…Like a string…Lifting it up, he shone his light onto it,

"Eeh…!"

Minori fell in front of him. Without a word, she crawled over and clung to Taiga's leg. Pointing at Ryūji's hand, she was desperately mouthing something, but the words wouldn't come out.

We finally scared her---was not something he was in any position to say right now. Because at the moment, Ryūji was also scared stiff. Hanging from his hand was a long hair. Wet and clinging to his fingers, it was dripping a viscous liquid from where it hung. What the heck is going on, he thought in confusion, until finally he thought up the answer.

That Kitamura, he actually was able to set up a trap that could scare someone. The one who set it off was Ryūji, but it had caught Minori as well at least. So there was a fourth part, huh? He'd probably call it [the hair, after it's been pulled out] or something.

"Ta, Ta, Takasu-clinic-kun…~! W, w, what is that…?!"

"It's hair…Ugh, it's sick!"

Shaking his hand to get the entwined hair off, he scowled immensely. But then, it finally hit him. If he thought about it carefully, it felt exactly the same as yesterday when he found that hair on his pillow---And he hadn't told Kitamura anything about that hair.

"Yah…Gya~! Gyah~! It's really creepy! It really is~~! We'll be cursed, there's something here, wahhh~!"

Without anyone to understand what she was going through, Minori quickly fell into a severe panick attack. She was beating the walls and yelling "Let me out of here !", and as Kitamura was trying to calm her down, he whispered into Ryūji's ear.

"…Nice one Takasu! So I guess you prepared as well, huh."

Eh…?

For a second, he felt as if someone had splashed his face with ice-cold water.

But, it was different. It was more like his blood had stopped. All at once, all the blood pooled to his feet, and his face and fingertips were chilled like ice.

"Ta, Ta, Ta,"

He grabbed Taiga's arm. He even grabbed at her shoulder. She shook him off, saying "Don't act so familiar." But, he tried again.

"Geez, what are you making such a face for!"

"…Taiga…Just now, that hair…"

"Yeah, I saw it….It's just like Kitamura to pull things off so well. See, Kitamura knows what he's doing after all ."

"You're wrong. It wasn't Kitamura. And also---I didn't tell him anything about yesterday. Don't you see, it's the same! Remember yesterday, the hair on my pillow, this must be--"

In the dark Taiga's puckered mouth opened and her cattish eyes gleamed wide, and then,

"Uwah! Taiga, hold hands with me! Let's walk together! Kitamura-kun, why are we going back inside~~ !"

"No, this way is the exit. It's true."

Following after Kitamura, who was laughing merrily, Minori pulled Taiga along with her. Left behind, Ryūji trembled. For some reason he couldn't get his legs to move.

"Ka…Kawashima!"

Just then he noticed Ami, who was trailing the others looking bored. Desperately reaching out to her, he called out her name.

"What? What's the matter?...Could it be, you're actually scared?"

She asked contemptfully. However, right now wasn't the time to act insulted or angry.

"Think what you want, but let's walk together! How about it?"

"N-O."

"Why not?!"

Hmph, Ami responded mercilessly to his pitiful speech, speaking over her shoulder with an expression like that of a villain.

"Mm…Lots of reasons. All this noise and stupidity wasn't fun at all, I'm bored, and I've had enough. I told you already, didn't I? I'm done helping you. Well, I guess I came along in the end, but…Isn't it enough that I came this far? I'm going to go a different route to get back to the villa faster."

"W…Hey, wait! Kawashima!"

He tried to call her back, but he was unable to follow, so he turned back to where Kitamura and the others had been. However, as he had been standing still, the three of them had gone on without him, leaving him clearly behind. As it was, he only had one choice left to him,

"…I'm coming too!"

"What? Geez, you're so noisy. Weren't you going to look after the cute Minori-chan and the worrisome Palmtop Tiger, huh Takasu-kun?"

"Just shut it!"

While he'd been abandoned by the others, Ryūji was still looking back worriedly as he followed Ami along one of the paths.

* * *

"H, hey…Do you really know where you're going?"

"Of course I do. When I was little, I had a secret base of sorts that I made here where I'd play."

Making large strides with her long legs, Ami continued walking along despite the sea water that flooded the cave floor. Ryūji could only chase after her, but he couldn't hide his anxiety. Looking around nervously, he pitifully followed along so he wouldn't be separated from Ami.

"I wonder if Kitamura and the others have noticed that we went off on our own? Maybe we should go look for them…"

"What are you simpering like that for? Are you that worried about being separated from the others?"

Ami suddenly stopped and turned around. The dim light of the flashlight made her eyes sparkle like stars.

"No, but----"

He almost went and said it.

About last night's strange events, as well as the one just now. Ryūji could swear that there was some weird thing breathing heavily next to him. However, if he were to tell Ami that, it would surely frighten her. In addition to being stuck alone with someone as unreliable as him in this dark place, if he told her something like that, there was just no way she would be able to keep calm.

"---I just, don't really like it. Being in the dark and the like."

"Hmm?"

Lifting her chin just like Taiga would, Ami stared at him. Her expression was certainly beautiful, there was no denying, but no matter how hard he looked her in the eye, it was impossible to tell just what sort of thoughts and emotions were swirling behind her calm façade. His best guess was a feeling of provocation.

"…Well then, if I were to walk off without you, just what would you do, hmm?"

Her face twisted with a devilish smile.

"Hey, are you scared? Are you worried I'll leave you behind?...Feeling lonely?"

"…Huh?"

"Answer me…Takasu-kun, are you thinking that you don't want me to leave? That I'm irreplaceable?"

In an instant, Ami closed the distance between them. Narrowing her large eyes without dropping her gaze at all, she lifted herself so that her nose was practically touching Ryūji's chin---But, he wasn't in the mood to take this sort of teasing. Even as he trembled at the soft touch of her skin, he pushed her away,

"This isn't the time for this!"

In fact, he was trying to think of a good way to tell Ami of their situation, about how they were currently in some weird circumstances. He wanted to tell her without scaring her that it wasn't the sort of situation where they should be playing around. However,

"Not the time, huh? Ohh, is that so? So what you're trying to say is, you want to find the others so you can go back to scaring Minori, is that right?"

Of course Ami wouldn't be aware of his struggle. Murmuring "Ah, enough", Ami put on a bitter smile towards Ryūji. Then, bending over slightly, she pressed her index finger to her lips and glanced up at him in her sure-kill pose,

"…Takasu-kun, you and Minori just don't match, you know?"

What's this nonsense she's spouting now?

"Wh,…I…It's not…That's just…What are you saying all of a sudden?!"

"You look shaken."

Giggling devilishly as she moved aside, Ami turned her back on him before unexpectedly muttering in a plain tone.

"Someone who suits Takasu-kun, that would be---"

Suddenly pausing, she sighed. Then,

"---Do you want to know?"

Looking back at him, she asked provokingly. Her hair swaying over the back of her tank top, for an instant he was able to make out the delicate profile of her face. However, miffed at being made a fool of, in a low mumble,

"…As if I care."

Ryūji simply replied.

"Well then, I won't tell you~~. I'll, be, going, now

.

“Eh?!!”

It was a lightning-quick teasing. So soon after finding out about Ryūji’s fear, she suddenly dashed off.

“Ka, Kawashima! Hey, wait up! Kawashima!”

She didn’t reply. She didn’t turn around. Like a mountain goat, she ran with light steps through the cave, splashing her way with great speed as she took a number of narrow side paths to get away from Ryūji.

Chasing after her desperately with only a bit of light as his guide, he panted due to both shortness of breath and fear. The way Ami ran could only be described as a reckless dash.

“Hey~! Wa, wait~! I’m begging you, wait! Do you really know where you’re going?!”

He finally caught up to her, grabbing her by the elbow. Surprisingly, she didn’t try to shake him off, and as she looked around,

"---Huh? I think I'm lost."

Is what she said. Panting, he held his hips. *I told you didn't I, Now what do we do, Do you even appreciate the seriousness of our situation*, were the things he was thinking but couldn't bring himself to say. Still, he forced himself into a standing position,

"It, it'll be okay. I'm sure Kitamura and the others will come find us! Don't be scared, I'm right here!"

Even as he verged on collapse, he put on a fake smile, in order to keep Ami from worrying. That was all. Unthinkingly, he tried placing a firm hand on her shoulder,

"…Takasu-kun, I'm sorry."

"Oh, no need to apologize!"

"No, I'm really sorry. Because I was lying about being lost."

He could almost hear his own jaw drop. Wriggling her body, Ami was glancing up at Ryūji with her moist Chihuahua eyes,

"Uwah, as if I would really be so stupid to get lost so easily~. Use your head for once, why don't you?"

Foo~l

, she called him as she tapped him on the nose with her index finger. Grabbing that finger, Ryūji,

"…!"

"Wah~! No~! Stop~! I said sorry~! No~~!"

While making sure she didn't escape, he took the tofu out from the plastic bag and started attacking Ami with it . He was really pissed. After he had gotten all worried--- *This girl, she's just so…*!

"…Puh…Ahahaha~!"

While being assaulted with tofu, something caused Ami to start laughing. In his opinion, the funny one was her. After all, her chin and cheeks were glistening after that series of tofu punch attacks.

"This isn't the time to be laughing! I'm seriously angry , you know?!"

"Ufuh, ahaha! Sorry, sorry…But look! You know, Takasu-kun, you're just like a kid! Ahahaha, cut it out with the tofu already~!"

"Damnit…Making a fool of me…"

Letting go of Ami, who was shaking with laughter, Ryūji looked at the tofu. Yeah, it was okay. As expected of tofu, it was still intact

"Really Takasu-kun, hmm, how should I put it…You're quite the ridiculous one, huh?"

"Shut up."

Still in a fit, Ami used the wall to remain standing as she wiped away her tears.

"But you know, that part…Like where you'd actually assault someone with tofu because you're angry, is not something I dislike…Hey hey. Stop staring at the tofu. I'm talking, so listen."

"I am listening."

"Takasu-kun, I did tell you, that Minori isn't suitable for you, right? That's the truth. You wouldn't be able to hit Minori-chan with a tofu. You wouldn't be able to act like a narcissist in front of her either."

Ami finally quelled her laughter and peered at Ryūji with her normally cool-headed eyes shimmering.

"And…Takasu-kun, you're like the moon after all."

"…What's that supposed to mean?"

"Minori-chan is like the sun. If you're next to her, you'll just be burnt to a crisp…that's what I think. If it's only admiration, you'll never stand to be her equal. For that, you'd need someone like---like me."

"…The only thing that's the same about us, is probably our height."

Minori's the sun---He could understand that much. Since she was a girl who shone like the sun, he had admired her from the moment he set eyes on her. He had fallen for her. But, that didn't mean that Ami could criticize him for it.

"…"

"That's just how I see it…Takasu-kun and I, we could be on par with one another, I think."

Before he knew it, her cool fingers were wrapped around his wrist. Standing beside Ryūji, Ami didn't go any further than holding onto him with her fingers as she looked calmly up at him with an unadorned expression. Then,

"As for Taiga Aisaka, there's just no relation. That's just what I think…And so I'm just telling you. It doesn't matter how you interpret it."

Pulling away only took a moment. It was even faster than her approach. She had turned away almost as if dancing and spoke as she flipped her hair, looking back at him with an angelic smile.

They had started walking again, and after a while,

"Huh?...The battery's dying?"

The flashlight that Ryūji was carrying was starting to go dim, even flickering.

"Eh? Mine too."

Just as Ami said, her flashlight was repeatedly flickering on and off just like his was.

"Ah, this is bad. If they go out, it'll be pitch black in here."

"Geh…If that happens, I don't think even I'd be able to get out of here…The exit is still a bit further."

"Let's meet up with Kitamura and the others."

Looking at one another and nodding, they started running at the same time. It wasn't a joke, they were in a real pinch.

After running seriously for a while, the two of them finally heard the voices of the others.

"Kawashima! It's Taiga and the others!"

"Yeah, I hear them!"

Relying on the flickering light source, they went down another narrow path,

"Uwah, mine's dead!"

"…Take my hand! Let's hurry!"

Ryūji, who was in the front, stretched out his hand. As Ami's flashlight died, she took hold of Ryūji's fingers. He gripped her hand firmly. He was scared, but Ami was a girl after all. He had to do his best to protect her. So finally the two of them made it out onto the main path,

"Ugyahhh!...That scared me!"

"Unyah!"

They were met by Minori's shriek as well as a thoroughly shocked Taiga.

"Takasu and Ami! Where did you two go, we thought you were lost you know?!"

"W, we were! You left us behind! Also, there's something wrong with our flashlights. Kawashima's is already dead, and mine isn't much better."

"So yours are like that too huh!"

Hearing Kitamura, Ryūji was practically speechless. Now that he looked closely, Taiga's flashlight that was being carried by Minori was already dead and both

Minori and Kitamura's were flickering…and as they were talking,

"…Uwah, it's dead!"

Ryūji's light went out.

"No way, hey, no, no, no! What do we do when they all go out?! Won't we be stuck in here?!"

Minori's screams were on the verge of tears.

"N, no, if we just stick to the wall, we can go back… Since we didn't take any detours."

"What?! I'm tired of walking! There's no way I'm going all the way back the way we came, just impossible! Also, if we stick to the wall, we won't know if we're still going the same way or not! We'll end up walking in circles! Gah, uwahh, it went out~!!"

Their bad luck was just getting worse and worse as at that moment, Minori's flashlight flickered and went out. In the bit of light left from Kitamura's remaining flashlight, Minori desperately clung to Ami and Taiga's arms. Ryūji also moved closer to them to make sure they didn't get separated, sticking close to the girls' backs,

"Hey, you too, get over here---"

He fell completely silent.

Kitamura's light went out as well. They were left in pitch darkness. There wasn't even a shred of light. His sense of hearing sharpened, he could hear someone gulp. The stream continued to rush by,

"Sorry…I'm just, I…I used up too much energy and I' m not feeling so well…I can't stand any m…"

"Eh?! Mi, Minorin?!"

"Oh no, Minori-chan?! Seriously?!"

"Kushieda!"

Thud, the sound of Minori collapsing resounded in the dark. As if compulsively, Ryūji started searching with both hands for the collapsed Minori, but,

"…It's okay, I've got Minori!"

He was relieved by Kitamura's voice. However---

"W, what the heck is that…that sound?"

"Yeah, it seems like it's getting closer…Eh? What is it?"

They could hear it, a deep sound that was very close by. Also, it sounded like breathing…Like something was crawling around.

"Ryūji…Where are you? Ryūji…"

"I'm here!"

A small hand grazed his cheek. Knowing right away that it was Taiga's, he reached out and grabbed her by the waist. Only for now did Taiga let him hold her without screaming at him. However, the weird sound didn't stop and Ryūji felt as if he was going to faint.

This has got to be a dream. A nightmare.

If it were reality…Right now, they would be attacked by something and might even die. He could see Yasuko's face in his mind. If something happened to him, Yasuko might just die from shock. Then there'd be nothing else left…If he had to die, he wished he could have confessed

to Minori. Whether she rejected him, despised him, or if their friendship fell apart, it wouldn't matter once he was dead.

And if this was reality, even 'that' would have been much more preferable. By 'that', he meant the dog-filled future that had made Taiga and him shiver. It would have been pitiful, miserable even, but even that would have some shred of happiness---at least maybe. That's how he felt about it now.

Taiga, Yasuko, and even Inko-chan were all there, and though it was a doghouse, it was still a home. Though they were puppies, they had a lot of children, and Yasuko looked happy hugging all her grandchildren… He wished he had told Taiga. He'd probably be smacked silly, but saying just a few words would have been enough.

That dream might actually not be so bad, he thought.

"Kyah~!"

A scream pulled him from his thoughts. The one who screamed was Ami.

"You hear that?! Hey, you hear it don't you?! Ah, no, what is it, what?!"

Ryūji could hear it as well. It was a deep roar that crept along the ground. It couldn't belong to a human; it was weird, fearsome, and could only belong to some sort of monster.

"Damn… it all~~!"

Unwilling to be defeated, Taiga grumbled in a low tone.

"…If it's like this…Then I'll----~~!! Come and get me, you cheeky bastard!"

Perhaps her tiger instinct had awakened, as after she let out a shout in the dark, she struggled to escape Ryūji's grip and stand. Wait, please don't fight, Ryūji tried his hardest to pull her back.

"Stop it Taiga! It's too dangerous, even for you!"

"Shut up! As if I'm going to let it happen like this! If I'm going to die, I'm going down fighting!...Hey, I can see sort of!"

"No way?!"

So being born beneath the sign of the tiger, this girl was a true feline with even the ability to see in the dark. That was Taiga Aisaka for you.

If she didn't like someone, she'd show her fangs, and if she thought they were a real enemy, she would rip them to shreds with her claws. Full of ferocity and fighting spirit that was completely disproportionate to her small body, she was growling. Though it was strong, though it was a reliable strength,

"Oryahh! Here I go~~!!"

"Stop~~!!!"

Even greater than Taiga's yell, Ryūji's shout echoed and permeated the cave. In a daze, he pulled back the raging Taiga and also frantically picked up Ami,

"It's alright, so everyone calm down! It's over if we all panic! First, let's do a head count! One~!"

"T, two~!"

Ami's trembling voice replied.

"Three~e!

Came Taiga's howl-like cry. But then,

"…Four and five aren't he~~re~!!"

Ryūji almost collapsed on the spot. Four and five, in other words Minori and Kitamura. Taiga flew from Ryūji 's arm almost like a bullet,

"Mi~no~ri~n~! Ki~ta~mu~ra~ku~n~!"

She desperately called out to her nonresponsive best friend and crush, then,

"…Uwah~!"

She slipped. And fell. He couldn't actually see her in the dark, but he was pretty sure. Beyond Ryūji's reach, Taiga's scream echoed. Then, splash, the sound of water.

"Ta, Taiga?!! Did you fall?!"

"…Puh~! Gupu~! Fueeehhh~!"

Still out of it, Ryūji crawled on all fours through the darkness towards the sound of the splashing water. He

desperately swept his arms around, and somehow he grabbed onto what seemed to be her arm; he had to pull her out quickly---

"Taiga, are you okay?!"

Minori's voice echoed with a strange loudness. Then next,

"Stop! Sto~~p! Kitamura-kun, there's been an incident! We have to save Taiga!"

"Roger!"

It came on. A light. Two flashlights.

Holding one of them, Kitamura was standing just a bit away. Then the other,

"…Y, You…"

"Kukuku…I guess we've been found out…I will not run or hide! I am Minori Kushieda, aka Minorin!"

With the mic she was holding, that last sound…The sound he had thought was a monster that hadn't seemed human was revealed. The mic was not pointed at her mouth, but, at her stomach.

And, what Ryūji was clutching wasn't Taiga's arm, but rather her leg. With one leg grasped and lifted by Ryūji, she was desperately fighting to keep her panties concealed. She still didn't notice what was happening. To be honest, neither Ryūji nor Ami had any clue what was happening either.

Why? What? Alias Minorin, just what in the world is going on---?

Chapter 6

"The perpetrator was---me!"

Thump!

…Looking at Minori who pointed at herself, Ryūji, Taiga, and even Ami were shocked speechless. Sitting side by side on the couch, their mouths were agape like they were children in a stupor.

And, Minori pointed at Kitamura next to her,

"This is my accomplice!"

"Sorry everyone."

"I'm very sorry!"

They bowed their heads deeply.

A silence fell over the villa living room for a while, only broken by the sound of the constant waves. The sun was already down, and outside the window the sky was like a transparent indigo sheet.

"…What…exactly do you mean…?"

Taiga's weak moaning voice trembled slightly with a strained, almost panicky tone.

What Minori and Kitamura were confessing to was first about the pillow in Ryūji's room. Next, there was the matter of the clothes left in Taiga's room. Also, the shaking window and the closed door. Even the hair in the cave. And finally, there was that weird monster.

"And well, you know. It's like this…The both of you were so naive that I wanted to tell you guys how to do it right, you know? By the way, the squishy liquid was concentrated lotion. And the hair was from my own head ."

Grabbing the hair at the back of her head, Minori was certainly holding a bundle of hair, but it was cut short.

"Naïve, you said…So then…That means you knew all along? About the plan Taiga and I made?"

As Ryūji asked incredulously, Minori nodded "Yes".

"From the beginning, I thought something was up. There were so many weird things happening, and Taiga and Takasu were whispering so much. Are those two scheming something, I thought. But what confirmed it

was Kitamura's 'doppleganger' when you were making the curry. Takasu-kun, you were just pretending that you were with Taiga the entire time, weren't you?"

"Y, yeah."

"With that, I got a clear suspicion. Like, I get it, you know? That is, even though Taiga sucks at chores, Takasu-kun kept saying "so good, how skillful" and so on."

Well, he had just thought that if Kitamura had been listening in that it'd be good to better his impression of her…But of course Ryūji couldn't say that out loud now.

Seeming completely unremorseful, Kitamura scratched his head as he spoke to Ryūji.

"But, didn't you think it was weird? In the cave, it was nothing but a string of failures. Didn't you think "there's no way that Kitamura could be this unreliable" or something?"

"Ah, not really, I just thought 'so this guy really is an idiot'…"

"R, really?"

Hearing such a low opinion from his best friend, Kitamura's expression turned somewhat gloomy. He'd had no idea, but rather than that,

"…I was completely fooled by Kushieda's stellar acting…I really thought you were scared."

"Eh? Didn't it seem unnatural? That sort of weird reaction wasn't really like how a scared girl would act, was it?"

"No, since it's Kushieda, that's exactly how I think you 'd react…"

"R, really?"

Minori took on a slightly complicated expression. But really, she had fooled him completely. He hadn't thought that Minori would be one of those people who could trick others so easily, but maybe he had decided that too quickly.

"…Ahh…geez…so it was all for naught, huh…"

Clasping the thoroughly exhausted Taiga by the shoulder, Minori was smiling.

"Mm well, it was fun! Thanks Taiga. And Takasu-kun as well."

"…You're not mad? That we tried to take advantage of your fear of horror? Well, we failed, but…"

"I'm not mad."

Minori was waving double peace signs while shaking her head side to side,

"And actually, all the declarations that I'm easily scared, were really for a time like this. In other words, that is…I'd say things like, I'm scared of horror, so scared …or, zombies are so scary. It's all part of my luring method."

"Umm…Eh? What are you talking about?"

"That is, if I keep saying I'm scared, eventually someone will get the idea "Well, why don't we scare her" . Then I get to enjoy it, you see? Putting it clearly, I really really absolu~tely love it. Horror, thrillers, the occult, zombies, I just can't get enough. I scream "Kyah, kyah!" and make a big fuss, but really, it's the most fun thing ever for me. Well, I also love roller coasters."

I was completely fooled---Thoroughly beaten, Ryūji stared up at the ceiling. Taiga's mouth was hanging open dumbly as she was overtaken by exhaustion and laid her head upon her arms and closed her eyes. The lie she had told Kitamura last night might have come true. Minori's act had basically beaten both Taiga and Ryūji into submission. Right from the start even.

"Actually, last night, you know, after I figured it out, I got Kitamura-kun to join me, so then we held a tactical meeting. And then, Taiga and Takasu-kun did too, didn't you. So taking the opportunity, I sent him as a spy."

"Ami was added optionally."

Being called optional, Ami didn't say anything, just making a sort of grimace. Just maybe, the most unlucky one might have been Ami.

Looking up at the ceiling, Ryūji couldn't even make the slightest motion. Just what in the world was I doing?

Finally on such a trip, with such a chance, just how could it have ended like this?

Taiga must have been in a similar state of mind as she sat curled up on the couch, furrowing her brow

worriedly. She had even tossed aside her chance to get closer to Kitamura and for what? Nothing, not a thing, right?

It had been such a waste. And now, their summer was over.

With nothing else and no change in his relationship with Minori, his one and only 17th summer was ending.

“Well, um anyway…Ta-da!”

Maybe feeling guilty, Minori and Kitamura acted deliberately cheerful, taking out a large bag.

“Actually, yesterday I bought some fireworks as well. Let’s head out to the beach!”

Ryūji wasn’t in the mood to act energetic, but he thought he might as well go along with it as it might be just what he needed.

The blooming, scattering fireworks---well, he himself didn’t have a chance to bloom…

The breeze that passed over the beach carried the sorrowful cry of cicadas from the direction of the mountains. The sun had gone down much faster than expected and even autumn seemed to be approaching rather quickly.

Listening to the waves, Ryūji walked along the surprisingly cold beach in his sandals. Just earlier when they had been walking back, it had been so warm in the sun.

“Uwah…! Scary, it's scary Minorin!”

He turned as he heard Taiga yell.

“It’s fine, not scary at all. Just look! It’s pretty!”

Taiga had her arms outstretched, and Minori lit her fireworks for her. Suddenly, the cylinder Taiga was holding started emitting a steady stream of pale green flame, sparking noisily, and giving off a faint burst of light to the surroundings like a star. As if she wasn’t sure what to do, Taiga just stood and stared at it. The flame lit Taiga’s ever so pale face, as well as Minori’s smile.

"Alright, now which one should I get~. Maybe this one?"

Then, picking out one from the bag, Minori lit her chosen firework. There was a bit of a pause,

"Oops!"

"Uwah!"

As Minori and Taiga cried out, there was a vivid burst of pink as the flame shot out. It grew brighter and shone clearly,

"Ahaha! This is awesome!"

The ecstatic Minori spun around and around. Swinging the pink flame around in the darkness with her arms outstretched, she left behind a ribbon of light in a circle around her.

What a wonderful smile, Ryūji thought. Even more so than the fireworks, Minori's pearly teeth emitted a radiance from her smiling face. And her shining eyes glittered even more strongly.

As for the one watching her, without a trace in Minori's life, without even a shred of proof of his existence, he was going to disappear. Becoming her boyfriend, getting closer to her, or being able to surprise her were all things he couldn't do…He had even gone as far as to use such despicable scare tactics, but in the end even that hadn't worked. Making her happy would be absolutely beyond him.

His feelings of nearly wanting to cry weren't just because summer was nearly over.

A bit off to the side, Kitamura lit the firework launcher he had set up, and with a shrill screech, it soared into the sky. "Wow~!" Minori cried out. Taiga wordlessly watched with her mouth agape. As the girls looked on, the shot burst with a bang, blossoming into a flower of red and green over the waves of the sea.

In the other direction, Ami was sitting down. While she pretended to be watching the fireworks as well, she was in fact not looking at anything at all. With an unfocused gaze, she was simply clutching her knees. She just looked bored, and a little lonely.

Ami seemed to have found out about his feelings for Minori. How in the world did that happen---Then, as he was looking at Ami's face, she seemed to notice his gaze.

Looking at Ryūji, she then shrugged. Without even a hint of a laugh, it was a slight motion.

Now that he thought about it, Ami had asked him something in the cave earlier---Takasu-kun, do you feel lonely? She'd asked. Ryūji hadn't replied. Now, he thought that maybe he was.

The way he had replied earlier, just maybe, might have made her feel just like he was feeling now. As if, even if he were to disappear, it wouldn't matter to anyone. Maybe that's how she felt. Minori's worth to him and his own worth to Ami, no matter how much he considered it he couldn't think that they were equivalent.

Standing up, Ryūji started walking. Coming to terms with his rejection, he stood next to her.

"Hey…Today was just ridiculous, huh."

"…"

Looking up at Ryūji with an annoyed expression, Ami quickly looked away.

"About the conversation earlier. I never did reply… You know, I would be lonely if you weren't here. But, how should I say it…"

He realized what he wanted to say.

"…That is…It's not about whether someone else is lonely, it's about whether you're lonely or not, right? If you feel lonely, or start to feel that way, then you'll want to find a solution…isn't that right? Look. That's how it is for us. Just as you said…we're the same. If you're lonely, I think it would be better to just come out and say it."

As she stubbornly refused to look at him, Ami's eyes shone brightly. The fireworks that Kitamura fired into the sky reflected clearly within her large eyes. It was extremely pretty. It wasn't a matter of lies or truth, he just felt that it was beautiful.

"…Takasu-kun…"

Finally, Ami opened her mouth.

"You know I, I---"

Still turned away, without meeting his gaze, she whispered almost inaudibly. Eaten up by the waves, her voice was faint, fading like the bursts of fireworks.

--- Never considered whether I was lonely or not, she said.

"Think about it. Think carefully."

"…Won't that…be painful?"

"If you can do something about it, I don't think it should hurt that much."

The loneliness…Ryūji understood and started walking. What he told to Ami also applied to himself. There was definitely something he could do. There was something he had to do to stand on equal ground. Really, it was something very simple.

"Hey Kushieda."

"Hm?!"

With some fireworks in hand, Minori turned around. He was saddened by the fact that he didn't have a place with Minori. That he wasn't on the same ground, that

was definitely it. So, he had to try calling out to her. To search for any possibility, to find the space, he had to call out for something, anything. He wanted to shout, I'm right here!

"Umm…"

Next to Minori, Taiga started to sneak away. Muttering, "I'll go give Bakachi some fireworks", she made way for Ryūji. To show his appreciation for her support, he regrouped his courage.

"…Umm, Kushieda. T, thank you."

"Eh?"

"I was really scared. But now, I guess it was fun. You had me completely fooled. When you're around, how should I put this, it's always a surprise. When you're around---It's fun. In any situation."

As if she was tired, Minori was surprisingly quiet, but then,

"…Ahaha, I should be the one saying that!"

She looked back at Ryūji with her usual smile.

"I really had fun on this trip. Really, thank you. You really gave me a great time. The seaweed ghost, and also, the spicy curry. It was delicious…Ah, and when we made those sandwiches together. You tried my Minori special that was packed with mustard. And…also…my weird talk, you listened without laughing. You were really understanding."

Minori was slowly spinning the firework in both hands, staring at the stream of flame that came out, and smiling.

"And, about scaring you, I'm really sorry. I'm also sorry for dirtying your towel. Next time, I'll get you a present…I just really, wanted to show you a ghost, and I went overboard."

"You wanted to show me…?"

"Yeah. That's right."

Minori was bent over looking at the spark, but then she slowly looked upwards. The fire reflected brightly in her eyes as she looked straight up at him.

"You told me before about how you wanted to see a ghost. So, I thought I'd show you one---Takasu-kun seemed to be trying really hard to show one to me after all. Although I was acting about being scared, I was being serious when we were talking. Those were my real feelings."

Listening to Minori explain her intentions, Ryūji remained silent. Minori continued on to fill in the silence.

"Hey Takasu-kun, why do you think you tried to scare me?"

"Ehh---That was…Because Taiga said you disliked horror, I guess…"

"Playing a prank?...Just messing with me, you mean?... I don't think so. Takasu-kun isn't the type to openly show dislike for someone else. You seem more like the type to try and spread happiness."

He was at a loss for words. Still, even as he remained silent, Minori didn't get mad, didn't even laugh, but just continued to look at him.

"…By scaring me, you probably felt that you could create some sort of happiness, right Takasu-kun? That is what I really want to believe…I think it's really mysterious."

"That's…"

He licked his dry lips. Like a fish struck through the heart, he continued to flail.

But he spoke.

He wanted to say it.

"…I want to make you believe, that ghosts do exist. I wanted to show you them. That it wasn't a lie, and that you're not isolated, so---so that's why."

He merely prayed that Minori would somehow understand his jumble of words without misunderstanding.

"…I see."

Saying nothing more, Minori showed a rather tender expression. Just maybe she had been able to understand

what he was trying to convey. Just how well, though, he wasn't entirely sure.

Showing that slight smile, she continued.

"…Takasu-kun, did you see a ghost?"

Ryūji slowly nodded. I did. I certainly found one.

Maybe Minori had noticed. A ghost—and his own existence, perhaps she had found them. Without actually asking, Ryūji just stared at the sand at his feet.

He really hoped that she had noticed.

Even just a bit, he hoped he had a place in her mind… Maybe not even as a ghost but as a fragment of a spirit, that would be enough.

"…Well, then next time, oh I know….Hey, Takasu-kun . Why don't we go looking for UFO's together some time ? Real ones, not just an artificial satellite."

Suddenly looking up towards the sky, her eyes narrowed into a smile.

"After ghosts will be UFO's…Then after that, Tsuchinoko. Just like that, if the world steadily changes… if I find the things I'm searching for…as my world changes, then, just maybe, someday…"

It was at that moment.

At the edge of his sight, Ryūji saw it shine.

He quickly pointed to the sea.

Turning around, Minori saw what Ryūji was pointing at.

It was a ball of light shooting upwards from the dark horizon. Then, it burst.

Against the indigo sky, it flowered outwards in a great circle. A second later, the sight was followed by a deep resounding boom.

Right over Minori's head, it looked as if the fragments were raining down.

With her arms outspread, Minori's eyes were wide open, shining more brightly than even the stars. The tip of her nose was lightly dyed in the light of the fireworks. Then, she murmured. Maybe she didn't mean for anyone to hear, maybe she was just speaking to herself…

"It blew up---The UFO did."

Kitamura as well looked up at the sky.

Even Taiga and Ami looked up at the sky in the same way.

So then, they were all rendered speechless. It was just so sudden, the splendor of the flames in the sky.

They continued to shoot upwards, bursting, followed by the sound of the explosion and falling back towards the earth. Red, yellow, blue, green, the midsummer fireworks scattered and glittered throughout the night sky.

"The start of the Milky Way War…is it…?"

Stretching out both arms towards the sky, Minori murmured as if she still couldn't believe it. Over and over again, like in a dream, I saw it, she said.

Beneath the dazzling sky, there was something Ryūji never noticed.

Taiga's upraised arms slowly dropped. The fireworks are awesome, just look at them, stupid dog---Unable to grasp onto the hem of his t-shirt like she normally would, Taiga's hand dropped.

Then, she finally understood. That she hadn't understood at all.

I see.

---So it’s like this, is it, she thought.

Only the eyes of Ami nearby gazed at the side of Taiga ’s face. Beneath the sky where the fireworks continued their performance, rather than look at her with pity, she rolled her eyes, but not saying a word, she only continued to stay by her side.

* * *

“…!”

When she awoke, Taiga didn't know where she was for a moment. She felt like she had just seen a weird dream, and still feeling caught up in the dream’s atmosphere, she was scared, thinking that she'd been abandoned in some horrible place.

“What are you doing, come on, we’re getting off!”

“…Ah? Eh?”

In front of her was Ryūji. Next to him was Kitamura as he unloaded Ami's luggage and handed it over to him. Completely oblivious, Ami was staring into her Chanel-brand compact while crying "Ahh, I knew being in this train would dry me out~!"

"Taiga! We're going!"

Pulled by her hand, she was pulled out of her seat. Minori was smiling ear to ear as she got Taiga's luggage for her.

Oh yeah, the trip's over, she thought. Before she knew it, the express train they were on was back at the station they were all familiar with, where the platform was overflowing with passengers getting off.

Hurriedly taking her stuff and grabbing onto Minori's hand, she started walking down the narrow aisle. Not sure when she had fallen asleep, her head was in tremendous pain from oversleeping. Actually, her stomach hurt quite a bit as well.

"Minorin…I think my stomach hurts…"

"Eh? Really? Umm, will you be okay? Takasu-kun, Taiga says her stomach hurts!"

What, Ryūji turned around. Kitamura did as well.

"Do you want to take some medicine? We'll rest for a bit on one of the platform seats."

Beyond his glasses, those kind eyes that could evoke tears just by looking at them were staring gently at Taiga's face. However, Taiga shook her head, saying she was fine and turning to look away.

It's fine.

It's fine like this.

In only a few days, summer break will end. Life will be back the way it usually was.

An unchanging status, an unchanging classroom, and unchanging days and nights. And maybe, something that changed just a little.

However, Taiga just thought, that's fine. After all, there's no reason for it to not be fine.

At the ticket gate where they met up two days ago,

"A trip's not over until you're home! Everyone, make sure you keep your wits about you so that you'll arrive home safely!"

Kitamura gave a slightly embarrassing speech. Completely ignoring him, Ryūji's face was full of contemplation,

"Should I stop by the supermarket…Today's Friday, so the tuna should be cheap."

How about it Taiga?, he tried to ask her,

"Be quiet, I'm tired! Always going on like some housewife, geez."

And was rejected cruelly.

Ami was lost in her own thoughts as well. Seemingly worried over her slightly sunburnt nose,

"Maybe I'll go and visit my parents' estate today~…"

She announced grandly. Tugging forcibly at the disorganized group, "Hey hey hey! Get over here! Come on!" Minori spoke seriously.

"Ehh, ending this trip without any accidents is most important! Ah well, anyway, see you everyone! Until the new semester! Let's meet up again at school!"

---We have club activities tomorrow though, Kitamura's blunt words were left behind as they waved goodbye. So then, heading towards the bike storage at the north entrance, Minori turned away from everyone. However, turning back around and calling Ryūji's name, "I'll bring a towel next time, you know! What color would you like? " she said. "Um, blue!" "Eh? Hot pink?" "I said blue!" " Eh? You want one made from gold and silver?" "B.L.U.E! " "Oh, I see, khaki!" Minori continued understandingly with an ever-increasing smile. "Ah, o, okay then…Khaki it is…" he said.

What idiots, Taiga said with a cold look while sitting. Looking for only a moment at Taiga with a slight laugh, Ami called out "see ya!" as she hit Ryūji's back, donning her sunglasses. Her face turning from a highschooler on

summer vacation back to that of a model, she walked off to the ticket gate for a transfer to get back to her parents' house. Kitamura gave Taiga some medicine before waving, "I left my bike over there too!" he exclaimed before setting off to join Minori.

And just like that, Ryūji Takasu's summer as a second-year high schooler ended.

Author's Notes

Something incredible has happened, my trouser button has just flown off.

I didn't want to believe it, but it was the truth... Hello everybody, this is Takemiya. Though it's not really important, I don't think anyone in Japan calls them " trousers" (ズ) for women's pants anymore, right? I'm really sorry about that. I think they now just use the term "pants" () to refer to those, right? And then there's another term for women's black tights... or are those panties... no, it's "spats" ()! Now they don't even use that, instead they call them "leggings" (), no? I'm not sure how it's spelt, that's because I don't use it often. Let's see... l-e-g-g-i-n-g (I can't believe I have to figure out how to spell such a word at this age)... or was it l-a-g-g..... (nope, I dunno).

Anyway, what's most important is...

Thank you all you readers for reading the first edition of Toradora! volume 4 in 2007! I am most grateful.

Phrases that used to naturally come off my tongue has now become "cliches", I'm still amazed at how time flies by quickly. Many times I had tried to put in "lame jokes" (I think they're also called something else now... they're called "gags" are they...?) whenever I thought of one, they get shot down by the editor, saying they were hardly funny. I wonder if readers are satisfied that this book finally got published after many such incidents. As long as my work could allow readers to relax and enjoy themselves, I'll be satisfied! This story will continue, so please continue to give your support for the next volume, as well as the one after that, thank you!

Today I will give my readers a little magical present, so please do accept it. This is a spell that would allow even those with small appetites to take in two bowls of rice:

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1. Take a cod, slice it and remove its ski
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..... By the time you noticed, your rice cooker will be devoid of two bowls worth of rice. If you're eating spaghetti instead, then you'll consume at least 200g! (Exclamation mark not an exaggeration.)

As long as you adhere to this method, then you'll be able to join me as another villager. Villager of what, you ask? You'll find out when you become one. Now come! Join us! Calories? We'll worry about that afterwards, so just come! There's no need to be scared... since it's tasty! Come on!

But seriously, this spell (or rather this dish) really is amazing. A cod that could breed tens of thousands of codlings, an egg that could grow into a chicken, and the thousands of rice that could grow into millions and millions of crops, and I've swallowed them all... Rather than the amazing amount of cholesterol they contain, I'm more amazed by the possibilities that the ingredients could turn into, which is endless. Could it be that I like eating that because of these possibilities? Speaking of which, I also like salmon egg rice. (Possibility of hundreds of salmons being spawned x Possibility of hundreds of rice seeds x 1000) Ahem, of course, I like salmon as well.

That is to say, as I indulge myself in all these possibilities, I'm also ruthlessly abandoning my

possibilities as a "woman". Oh my gosh! My fingers are bleeding from typing too hard!!!

...

Finally! I'm really, really thankful to you for actually reading this nonsense all the way to the end. I hope you would continue to support my works as I continue to try my best! Give me the energy I need to go on! To Yasu-sensei and the editor, I ought to be giving just as many thanks to you guys as well. Let this be our little secret, and let us continue to march on till the end as the accursed romantic story trio of author, illustrator and editor!

Takemiya Yuyuko